SHADOW SLAVE
VII
THE TOMB OF ARIEL

Shadow Slave

Volume-7

The Tomb of Ariel

Chapter-1231: Once More, With Feeling

Sunny dreamt of a black pyramid.

Somber and wreathed in darkness, it rose from a sea of flawlessly white sand like a towering mountain. Its slopes were like vast plains, and its sharp peak was like a spear that pierced the heavens. Outlined against the backdrop of the starlit sky, the pyramid was like a black rift in the fabric of the world.

Its edifice was built from millions of colossal stone blocks. Each block was darker than the darkness itself and perfectly aligned, leaving no gaps between them. And each of them… each…

Sunny felt a cold terror grip his heart.

Each of the stone blocks… was a Seed of Nightmare. There were millions of them, some already in bloom, some still waiting for their turn to blossom. At the base of the pyramid, the Nightmares were shallow and weak. Higher, they were harrowing and unfathomable. And higher still…

The slope of the colossal pyramid was broken and covered in cracks, with many blocks either shattered into dismal dust or missing. Four vast scars were tainting its immaculate surface, as if some unholy beast had torn through the eternal stone with titanic claws.

Above the scars was a narrow capstone.

But Sunny… he was not someone who could gaze upon it.

The moment he did, his soul convulsed in agony, and his consciousness shattered.

Time reversed its flow, but then stuttered and froze.

Time warped and screamed.

The silhouette of the black pyramid exploded into a myriad of lightless shards.

And then, Sunny was no more.

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There was the sound of wind whistling in his ears.

He was falling.

Coming to his senses, still disoriented, he sighed.

'Here we go again…'

Before doing anything else, Sunny summoned the Essence Pearl...

The next moment, he hit the water.

'Ha! I just knew this would happen!'

Instead of thrashing wildly, he let his body sink and waited for the breathing Memory to manifest itself. At the same time, Sunny extended his shadow sense outward and tried to understand the nature of his surroundings.

…Water. Nothing but water.

'Well, that's strange. Wasn't I in the desert just a few moments ago?'

They entered the Nightmare through a giant block of black stone that lay between the dunes, half-buried in the sand. Since the Seed was in the desert, the Nightmare was also supposed to take place in the desert… unless the Spell had sent them in a past so distant that the desert itself did not exist yet, hidden at the bottom of a sea.

The thing, though, was that…

'That's… very strange.'

The cool water around him was not seawater. It was freshwater. If Sunny was so inclined, he could open his mouth and drink as much as he wanted. Not that he would, of course.

'Huh.'

One thing was certain. Sunny had already guessed it before, but after witnessing the Tomb of Ariel in the vision at the start of the Nightmare, he was now sure — the giant block of black stone was, in fact, one of the building blocks of the great pyramid.

The unimaginable blow that had left four scars on the surface of the daemon's tomb must have sent quite a few of them flying far away into the desert.

And Mordret had just happened to stumble upon one. Just as expected, the Prince of Nothing had ulterior motives.

Or maybe they had just gotten terribly unlucky.

Or maybe it was fate.

In any case…

'Finally!'

The Essence Pearl finished weaving itself from sparks of ethereal light, and Sunny could breathe again. He could also see again, not that it was of any use — in any direction he looked, there was nothing but clear water.

There was a current, too… a strong and turbulent one. Sunny felt himself being pulled by it, unable to resist.

'Back to the surface.'

Breathing out a little, he watched the direction in which the bubbles rose, and followed. This time, Sunny did not have to panic and worry about drowning, since he had come prepared.

The Essence Pearl was held safely in his mouth.

Some time later, his head broke the surface of the water. Sunny looked around and frowned. Everything was covered in thick fog and suffused with somber twilight. He couldn't see far, and even his shadow sense seemed to be dulled by the mist.

If there was one consolation, it was that the mist seemed to be of a harmless, albeit somewhat mystical, kind. It was not the harrowing fog of the Hollow Mountains or its like.

'I should be thankful, I guess.'

But he was not.

Instead, Sunny felt… numb.

He had been in a constant state of tension since the start of the Battle of the Black Skull. The Third Nightmare was in no way less of an ordeal than the Nightmare Desert, but for now, at least, Sunny was safe — there were no Nightmare Creatures in the water, and no terrible danger waiting to swallow him alive.

And so, able to relax for the first time since forever, Sunny suddenly felt utterly exhausted, deeply tired, drained of all feelings, and numb.

With a sigh, he slowly spun in the water, and eventually noticed an unclear shape swaying on the waves some distance away, hidden by the mist. With nothing better to do, Sunny started to swim in that direction.

Less than a minute later, he reached a large piece of wood resting on the water. The piece of floating wood was flat and irregularly shaped, with jagged edges, like a broken fragment of a ship's hull. Most importantly, it was big enough for Sunny to climb on, with plenty of room to spare.

Pulling his tired body out of the water, Sunny climbed onto the slightly curved wooden raft and sprawled on it, looking up.

There was no sky, only swirling mist.

His thoughts were slow and heavy.

'Well… at least it's not so terribly hot anymore. That desert was a real nightmare. The Nightmare Desert… ah, what a fitting name…'

He was now inside the Third Nightmare.

And an exceedingly bizarre one, at that.

The source of the Nightmare was the Tomb of Ariel. Funnily enough, the cohort had failed to reach the real pyramid in the Dream Realm, but still ended up brushing against the illusory copy of it.

The very beginning of the Nightmare was highly unusual, as well. Sunny had not seen the time flowing in reverse, as it was supposed to happen, so he had no idea where exactly he found himself, and had no hint of what he needed to do to resolve the conflict of the Seed.

And lastly…

'Thirteen million challengers? What the hell was that?'

Had the Spell malfunctioned? There were not even a million Awakened in the whole world, let alone anywhere near the Nightmare Desert.

That was the strangest part.

But Sunny…

He was too tired to think about all that right now.

'I'm going to have to explore the area first. Then, I'll start searching for the others. We'll figure something out together.'

With that, he slowly inhaled and closed his eyes.

A few moments later, Sunny was lulled to sleep by the gentle swaying of the water.

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"No, no! Not again! Please!"

Sunny woke up with a yell and cursed, feeling his wooden shelter

lurch and almost capsize because of his sudden movement. The remnants of a dire nightmare were already disappearing from his memory, leaving behind only the bitter taste of madness and despair.

He shivered slightly, then grimaced and rubbed his face.

'What the hell… now I'm having nightmares within a Nightmare. What a great damn start to the day!'

Suddenly consumed by anger, he stood up, clenching his fists, and shouted:

"Curse it! Curse it all!"

His hoarse voice drowned in the mist.

The mist did not look as thick as it had before, but it still veiled the entire world. There was nothing within the reach of his shadow sense except for the endless expanse of flowing water.

"Curse it all…"

Sunny shut his eyes for a moment, then winced and sat back down.

He was in a terrible mood.

'What was even the point of it all?'

He was being pulled by the current… just like he had always been before. For most of his life, Sunny had just gone with the flow, struggling to survive and only reacting to things that threatened him.

Going to Antarctica was perhaps the first real decision he had made for himself. Sure, it might have been a reaction as well… but later, Sunny developed an understanding of what he wanted to achieve.

He had wanted to protect the civilians of the Southern Quadrant and the soldiers of the Evacuation Army. He had wanted to prevent the great clans from messing everything up. The things he had done in East Antarctica were not a reaction — instead, they were the result of an active desire to change the world in the way he saw fit.

That was the first time Sunny had tentatively attempted to bend the world to his will, instead of letting the world press him into the ground.

And for what?

What was the result?

The siege capitals of East Antarctica were, most likely, already destroyed. The Evacuation Army had been wiped out, and the civilians had been slaughtered. There was a desperate hope in his heart that some miracle had happened, saving them all, but Sunny knew that it was a futile dream.

When had there ever been a miracle like that?

No. He failed.

'Ah…'

The world was not so easily bent.

'Damn it!'

Sunny stared into the mist with resentment.

And then, he heard a voice:

"Done feeling sorry for yourself yet?"

'What the?!'

With a start, Sunny flinched away from the source of the voice. Falling on the wet surface of the wooden raft, he crawled back and looked up.

There was a slender figure standing above him, with a mocking smile on his face.

It was a young man with black hair, alabaster skin, and a lithe build. He was wearing a simple tunic of beautiful black silk and a pair of dainty silk shoes, looking like a porcelain doll.

His eyes were like two pools of cold darkness.

The young man… was Sunny.

Or rather, it was the Sin of Solace.

However, the spirit of the cursed sword did not look vague and blurry anymore. It looked utterly complete and real…

In fact, it looked slightly more real than Sunny himself.

Chapter-1232: Lost in the Mist

'What the hell?!'

Sunny reached the edge of his makeshift raft and froze there, his fingers submerged in water. A perfect copy of him was standing motionlessly a few meters away, looking down with a mocking smile on his lips.

The pale face, the onyx eyes, the raven black hair… it was all the same. But the apparition was much more composed and full of malice than Sunny. There was a boundless ocean of madness hiding behind the cold darkness of its amused gaze.

For a moment, Sunny was convinced that one of Mordret's Reflections had somehow found him within the mist. But the tone with which the apparition spoke was simply too familiar. With a shudder, he realized that this copy of him was the manifestation of the Sin of Solace.

However…

"Gods. You look so pathetic."

'Yeah… that's definitely that damned sword.'

But how could it be?

At first, Sunny had only heard indistinct whispers when holding the Sin of Solace. Later, he could clearly hear its voice. And later still, after Falcon Scott, a vague illusory figure would follow him around… now, however, that figure seemed perfectly real.

That was not the most frightening fact, though.

The most frightening thing was that Sunny did not have the Sin of Solace summoned. How could the spirit of the cursed sword be here,

if the sword itself still rested within the still darkness of his soul?!

Suddenly, a chill ran down Sunny's spine.

As if reading his mind, the Sin of Solace laughed.

"Ah, how fun. I'll give you some credit, Lost from Light… you never fail to amuse, at least. What, are you afraid of me now?"

Sunny hated to admit it, but he was. He did not know what to expect from the cursed jian… it was tied to Ariel, after all, who was both the Demon of Dread and the architect of the harrowing pyramid of nightmares. Even if the Transcendent Memory only contained a facsimile of a distant whisper left behind by the ancient daemon, it was still an artifact of terrifying power.

He knew that power all too well. Sunny had slain many Corrupted Nightmare Creatures with its help, after all — some of whom he had no business being able to kill — and, as a result, was exposed to its destructive influence in turn. He had thought that he was handling the insidious influence of the Sin of Solace well…

But if he had, then why did the apparition feel more real than ever? How was it able to appear before him without him even holding the cursed sword?

Sunny remained silent for a while, then forced out a smile.

"Afraid of you? Nonsense! Of course not."

The Sin of Solace tilted his head a little, studying Sunny with some interest.

"Oh... but I think you should."

His voice sounded relaxed, but that only made the words more chilling to hear.

However, Sunny exhaled with relief.

"Well, why would I? You're not real. Am I supposed to be frightened of every imaginary bastard? Life's too short for that."

The doll-like young man in front of him raised an eyebrow.

"Are you sure that I am not real?"

Sunny scoffed.

"I wasn't before, but I am now. I suspected for a long time, of course, but since you were not annoying enough to waste my time on getting to the bottom of this, I chose to concentrate on other things. But hey, since it's just the two of us now, let me clear a few things."

He moved away from the edge of the makeshift raft and looked up at the Sin of Solace while still remaining in a sitting position.

"There's no point in pretending to be something that you are not. And what you are not is a real being… no, you're just a tiny, insignificant part of my mind that the enchantments of the Sin of Solace turned against me. How do I know? Well, you are a part of me, so you should already be aware."

The apparition remained silent, looking at him with curiosity.

Sunny shook his head.

"I know because I can lie when I talk to you, and I also don't have to answer all of your questions. That is only possible when I am talking to myself. You asked me if I was done feeling sorry for myself? I was not compelled to answer. You asked if I was afraid of you? For a moment or two, I was, and yet I was able to say that I wasn't.

So…"

He grimaced.

"Really, I should have realized it the first time you kept distracting me with annoying questions, and I told you to shut up instead of giving you a real answer. Ah… I feel ashamed that it took me so long."

The Sin of Solace chuckled.

"Oh, but your Flaw is a subjective thing, isn't it? Maybe you can lie to

me not because I am a part of you, but simply because you believe that I am a part of you."

Sunny smiled.

"Wouldn't it be great, if my Flaw was so easy to deceive? No… that is not the case. Plus, I had no reason to believe that you weren't an actual entity before. If anything, it would have been the other way around."

The apparition remained motionless, staring at him with a bleak expression. Then, the spirit of the cursed sword… the small broken piece of Sunny's own mind… sighed.

"Alright, you caught me. I am not real. Indeed, I am just a figment of your imagination."

The Sin of Solace was quiet for a few moments, and then grinned.

"But, have you not considered… that, maybe, quarreling and conversing with a splintered piece of your own mind is a bit more frightening than being haunted by a cursed sword?"

He laughed.

"I mean, wouldn't that mean that you have completely lost your mind? Lost from Light... damn lunatic... oh, this is simply wonderful!"

Sunny stared at the laughing copy of himself with a somber expression.

For once, he had nothing to say.

After a few long moments, he turned away and uttered through gritted teeth:

"...Shut up!"

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The water was murmuring softly as the strong current pulled the makeshift raft forward. The mist was slowly growing less thick, but

Sunny still couldn't see or feel anything in it.

When he grew thirsty, he summoned the Endless Spring and drank from it, looking at the clear water around him with suspicion. When he got hungry, he summoned the Covetous Coffer and took out some rations from inside it.

'I should have stocked up before leaving the siege capital.'

To Sunny's disappointment, his supplies were already running low. He had kept the Coffer well stocked while serving as an army scout, but after becoming an envoy to Clan Valor, there was no need to anymore. So, there had not been a lot of useful things left inside the bottomless chest at the start of the Nightmare.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed since Sunny entered the Nightmare, too. The dim twilight permeating the mist never grew brighter or darker. However, he felt as if it had not been more than a couple of days.

He had spent most of his time numbly staring at the wood grain of his makeshift raft. For some reason, it looked strangely familiar. The strange sense of familiarity was driving Sunny crazy…

But then again, perhaps it was the fact that he had gone crazy that caused the irrational sense of familiarity with a random piece of flotsam.

After all, there had to be a reason why the spirit of the Sin of Solace was suddenly much more clear, frighteningly real, and even able to appear without Sunny summoning the cursed sword. The less stable his mental state was, the more substantial the presence of the apparition was supposed to be.

Sunny did not feel particularly insane, just numb, heartbroken, and emotionally drained. However, which lunatic knew of their madness?

The Sin of Solace, meanwhile, was behaving rather strangely. Sunny was painfully aware of his many failures, so he had expected the apparition to barrage him with mockery and contempt. Did you want to protect the people of Antarctica? Did you think that your pathetic

self was capable of protecting anything?

Stuff like that.

Hell… after that last conversation with Morgan, Sunny knew that the waking world was more or less doomed. He didn't even know if Rain would be okay. The Sin of Solace could have used that fact to drive a nail into his heart, too.

But the cursed sword mostly remained silent.

At some point, Sunny glanced at the apparition, which was still standing in the spot where it first appeared, and raised an eyebrow:

"Hey… aren't you going to mock me? Don't you want to remind me how pitiful and pathetic I am?"

Sunny's perfect copy stared at him for a few moments, then looked away with indifference.

"...That grew old ages ago. I can't be bothered."

Sunny frowned.

"Come to think of it… why is it that you haven't moved a single centimeter in all this time?"

The Sin of Solace scoffed.

"Where am I supposed to go? This raft is not that large… well, I might as well stand on water, true. But why should I?"

Sunny studied him for a bit, then shook his head.

"No… I think you're hiding something."

His hallucination laughed.

"Oh, yeah? So, now you are paranoid, too?"

Instead of answering, Sunny rose from where he was sitting and took a step toward the Sin of Solace. His copy frowned.

"What do you think you're…"

"Get lost."

Sunny pushed the apparition aside, forcing it to take a step back and sway dangerously at the very edge of the makeshift raft, almost falling into the water.

The Sin of Solace cursed, but Sunny paid him no attention. Instead, he stared at the spot where the hallucination had been standing all this time.

'...Interesting.'

There, a single rune was roughly carved into the wood.

Chapter-1233: Coming to Terms With the End of the World

Not paying the Sin of Solace any attention, Sunny bent down and studied the rune.

It was carved into the wood, but not with any kind of instrument. The grooves were deep, but crude and uneven, with rough and shaky edges. It was as if someone used their nails to scratch the rune into the wooden surface in a fit of madness.

The rune was a familiar one, too.

"Wish."

It had other meanings, too — desire, yearning, longing, aspiration… even hope, sometimes, depending on the context. Sunny knew that rune all too well. How could he not, after spending so much time on the Chained Isles?

But its most fundamental meaning was just that, a wish.

He stared at the rune for some time, thinking.

Who had carved it into the ancient wood? And why?

Had it been carved before the piece of wood he was using as a raft ended up as flotsam, or after?

What did it mean?

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then tentatively scratched at the wood with his nail. It was really tough — much tougher than mundane wood would have been. This raft of his turned out to be really sturdy. He wouldn't be able to leave a scratch on it without losing a nail or

two...

"What are you doing?"

Sunny gleaned at the Sin of Solace, who was looking at him with a bewildered expression.

'Playing dumb, huh?'

He pointed to the rune.

"Were you trying to hide it from me?"

The apparition tilted its head in confusion.

"Hide what?"

An angry expression appeared on Sunny's face, and he gritted his teeth.

"Stop messing with me, you pale bastard! You have been standing here this whole time, as if trying to prevent me from noticing the rune!"

However, deep inside, he felt a hint of doubt. Was… was he now seeing things? Was the rune not really there?

The Sin of Solace suddenly laughed.

"Gods… your expression, it's priceless. What about the rune? So there is a rune. Why would I care? In fact, why do you care? You seem completely beside yourself."

Sunny frowned, remained silent for a while, then let out a sigh.

Indeed, why would he care about some rune? Yeah, it might have possessed some meaning, like hinting at something about Hope. But a single rune was not enough to learn anything.

Maybe he was just so bored that he made a big deal out of nothing.

Maybe he was just trying really hard not to think about other things.

Like the fate of East Antarctica. Or Rain.

Or himself.

With a sigh, Sunny sprawled on the ancient wood and stared into the mist.

East Antarctica… was most likely finished. This was an appalling tragedy and a personal wound for Sunny. For the first time in his life, he had tried to act upon his nascent principles… and failed. In the end, his intervention didn't amount to anything.

Sure, he had prevented the great clans from causing the deaths of many civilians and government soldiers. But with the great abominations now rampaging across the Southern Quadrant, how many of those people he had saved would survive?

'Ah, this feeling… how bitter…'

The taste of failure was painful enough to make him want to never have such desires again. To never have the nerve to try and force his will upon the world again. To never… try.

'So childish.'

He was like a novice who had swung his training sword once, failed to perform the cut perfectly, and instantly gave up on wanting to learn swordsmanship. How many thousands of swings had it taken him to gain a basic level of control over his blade on the Forgotten Shore?

One failure, no matter how painful, was not a reason to stop trying.

Nevertheless, even if he somehow overcame his disillusionment and numbness… the cruel truth remained the same.

The Chain of Nightmares was only the start of a global catastrophe. Sunny did not know how many years the destruction of the waking world would take — a couple, a dozen, or a hundred — but he believed Morgan when she told him that it was inevitable.

The scope of this truth was so vast that he could not even really

comprehend it.

It was the end of the world.

Or was it?

'I'm stuck here in the Third Nightmare, and may very well die. But Rain is out there in the waking world, which might be consumed by a global cataclysm at any moment.'

Sunny could not help but feel restless, disheartened, and afraid for his sister.

'At least Serpent is with her. It will protect her…'

Regardless of that, the revelation of the dire future forced him to look beyond his own experiences and motivations.

Sunny had been struggling against many things ever since becoming an Awakened. His personal indignation at becoming bonded with Nephis, his desire to be stronger than her and escape the chains of fate, his animosity toward the great clans and his ambition to see as many people as possible survive the Chain of Nightmares… all these matters were important and valid.

But, blinded by them, he never seriously considered the most fundamental and important conflict… mostly because it had always seemed too large and distant to have anything to do with a small and insignificant person like him.

The Nightmare Spell, which was slowly consuming humanity.

Now that he knew that the waking world had reached the point of no return, Sunny couldn't ignore the looming terror of it anymore.

'This is… this is just infuriating. I can't believe that I ended up being the bigger fool, out of the two of us!'

Back when Nephis had told him that her goal was to destroy the Spell, Sunny called her a lunatic. And he still believed that she was — her desire was nothing but pure madness!

However, as it turned out, the world they lived in was a world of madness. So it was Sunny, who just wanted to operate a Memory store and live a peaceful life, who was misguided.

In retrospect...

Maybe Neph's desire to conquer all the Nightmares and destroy the Spell was a bit insane, but Sunny's desire to just be free of it all and live carefree was pure lunacy.

The only sane ones were probably the people who fell somewhere in between these two extremes.

Like Effie.

Chapter-1234: Two Futures

Laying on a makeshift raft that was being pulled through boundless mist by a powerful current, Sunny suddenly burst out in laughter.

"Ah. Ah, I see now…"

Sin of Solace glanced at him with curiosity.

"What is it that you see, if you don't mind me asking?"

Sunny remained silent for a while.

"No, it's just that… I suddenly remembered an old conversation."

Years ago, in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, Effie — who was mostly a stranger back then — had told Sunny a strange thing.

She had told him that the Dream Realm was not hell, like everyone believed, but instead a paradise… a dark and cruel one, but a paradise nevertheless. The kind of paradise they all deserved.

He knew now that Effie felt that way because she had been trapped in a broken body and constrained to a wheelchair in the waking world, but received a chance to be healthy and vibrant in the Dream Realm… however, that was not the only reason.

Effie also believed that the waking world was dying — not because of the Spell, but because of what humans themselves had done to the ecosystem they needed to exist. It might have even died already if it wasn't for the Awakened and the gifts they had received from the Spell.

The last thing she had said to him back then… was that one day, in the future, more people would consider the Dream Realm a paradise, just like she did.

'This is what it comes down to, isn't it?'

If Sunny tried to think realistically about the future, then the destruction of the waking world did not necessarily have to mean the destruction of humanity. Humanity was going to persevere… the small part of humanity that had access to the Dream Realm, to be more precise.

There were hundreds of thousands of Awakened in the world, a few hundred Masters, and a few dozen Saints. But these numbers were going to swell soon… if the Chain of Nightmares was any indication, the Nightmare Spell was starting to run rampant once again. There was going to be an incredible amount of infected in the coming years… numerous new Sleepers, numerous new Awakened.

There would be many more Masters, too, and even many more Saints.

Even if the waking world was consumed, these people would be able to live on in the small part of the Dream Realm that had already been conquered by humanity. Many things would be lost, but the Citadels were not that far from being self-sufficient. Especially the great Citadels like Bastion and Ravenheart — those were already like cities.

'So… this is it? This is the future?'

Out of three billion, just a few millions would survive?

Sunny remained motionless, staring into the mist.

The Sin of Solace was silent.

'It is the future the Sovereigns believe in, at least.'

Sunny heard once that the Sovereigns had long given up on the waking world. Now, he understood better why, and what for. The great clans had been concentrating on creating a landing zone for humanity all this time, carving out a piece of habitable land in the Dream Realm.

Their reasoning was grim and cruel, but realistic.

Sunny stirred.

'...But it is not the only possible future.'

There was also the future Nephis believed in.

Nephis, who saw the Sovereigns as traitors and sinners — not because they had destroyed her family, but because they had given up on trying to resist the Spell.

If a new Supreme appeared… if that Supreme conquered the Fifth Nightmare and became Sacred… or even Divine, maybe… then who was to say how the future would turn out?

Maybe if a god was born from humanity, a divine miracle would save everyone.

Wasn't it a sweet dream?

Sure, the probability of something like that happening was zero. It was not realistic at all. It was impossible… just a bit of wishful thinking.

However, Sunny couldn't help but allow himself to bask in that unrealistic dream for a few moments.

He turned his head, staring at the lone rune that was carved into the ancient wood of his makeshift raft.

Wish.

Even though he knew that a miracle would not happen, he still wished that it did.

But then…

What was Sunny's own wish?

He... wanted to be free. Despite everything, he still wanted to be free. He wanted to have a choice, to be the master of his own fate, not a slave to it.

He wanted to be strong, too. Strong enough to break his chains, and protect those he loved.

He wanted to live a good life.

'It's time to stop thinking about the big picture and concentrate on what exactly I have to do right now.'

Most of the people he cared about were now inside this Nightmare. There were a few of them in the waking world, as well, including Rain.

So, his goal was rather simple.

First of all, he had to survive.

He also had to find his friends, and make sure that they survived, too.

Then, they had to conquer the Third Nightmare and return to the waking world.

A god might descend from the machine to save humanity, or not… most likely not. In any case, it would not happen any time soon, so the next few years, at least, would go according to the future that the Sovereigns envisioned.

In that future, the value of a Saint would be tremendous. A Saint would not be easily dismissed or bullied — in fact, the opposite would be true. So, Sunny had to become a Saint.

This was very convenient, considering that he was already inside a Third Nightmare, and the only alternative to Transcendence was death.

Additionally, as a Saint, he would be able to bring people — even mundane people — into the Dream Realm. So, should the waking world really perish, he would be able to save Rain and a few others from that destruction.

Or give them a chance to be saved, at least.

'Survive. Transcend.'

These were his goals, for now. And should he succeed… maybe other things would become possible, too.

'Become strong. Live a good life. Protect those I love.'

Defeat fate.

Be free.

'What a beautiful wish...'

Lulled by the sweet promise of a dreamlike future and the gentle swaying of the waves, Sunny slowly fell asleep.

Chapter-1235: Wondrous Sight

Sunny had a nightmare again. Waking up in cold sweat, he couldn't remember what he had dreamt about, but was momentarily paralyzed by an overwhelming feeling of a… dark, dreadful, devouring obsession.

His mental state must have suffered a greater blow than he had thought, for him to keep suffering from repeated nightmares. Well… that was not an unreasonable result, considering what had happened during the Battle of the Black Skull and after.

'I should summon Nightmare and let him guard my sleep. He can subjugate a few of these dreams, too.'

As soon as Sunny thought that, he felt that something was wrong.

'Wh…'

In the next moment, the raft beneath him lurched, and then, the calming murmur of the flowing water suddenly turned into a deafening roar.

Sunny was thrown off the cool wooden surface and tossed into the depths. Feeling water surge into his mouth and nose, he cursed, swiftly sensed the surrounding space, and tried to find the familiar piece of flotsam… it was his only refuge in the mist, after all.

The raft was a few meters above him. Struggling against the current, Sunny swam upward. There was something strange, though… the previously dark expanse of water around him was now suffused with light, and the higher he reached, the brighter it became.

Finally, Sunny breached the surface and shut his eyes tightly, blinded by sunlight.

The ever-present mist… was gone.

Pushing his body against the current, Sunny swam toward his reliable raft, climbed onto the slick wood, and coughed out a mouthful of water. Then, he brushed his wet hair back and tentatively opened his eyes.

After days spent in the twilight of the ghostly mist, it took them a few seconds to adjust to the brightness of the day. Slowly, a breathtaking vista revealed itself from white radiance.

Sunny gasped slightly.

In front of him, as far as the eye could see, was a vast expanse of clear, sparkling water. Gentle sunlight reflected from its surface, making the whole world seem as if it was littered with gemstones.

High above, in the great firmament of the blue sky, seven suns were shining with beautiful light.

One sun was rising from the waters far away to his right, painting the sky and the flowing water with a thousand shades of soft lilac. The colors of dawn slowly brightened as they gradually turned into a vast expanse of vibrant blue right above Sunny. Far to his left, another sun was drowning in the bloodred water, turning the world into a conflagration of fiery crimson light.

The eastern horizon was at dawn, and the western horizon was at dusk. However, it was the middle of the day where Sunny was.

He stared at the incredible sight for a while, awed, then shifted slightly and looked back.

Behind the raft, the world was exactly the same — there was nothing but water. No sign of the mist remained, as if it had never existed at all.

Sunny sighed, then turned north again… or at least in the direction he chose to call north, considering that the only rising of the seven suns was to his right. It was also the direction of the current that continued to carry his raft forward.

He spent some time taking in the strange, wondrous landscape of the Nightmare world.

'It reminds me of something.'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, wondering. Then, he took a deep breath.

The seven radiant suns, the vast expanse of clear water… it reminded him of a Soul Sea. His own would have been similar, if he had radiant soul cores instead of the lightless shadow cores.

Of course, he only had five of those, and the dark waters of his soul were still and unmoving. His Soul Sea was also infinitely smaller. There were other differences, too.

Still… the world in front of him seemed too eerily beautiful to be a mundane place.

Which posed a question…

'Where the hell am I?'

There was no desert in sight. There was no black pyramid, either. All Sunny could see was the bright water and the seven strange suns. It was a known fact that the sky, including the celestial bodies populating it, was not uniform across the different regions of the Dream Realm… still, he was pretty sure that he had never been anywhere near a place like that.

And there was definitely nothing like that within the Nightmare Desert.

Sunny could reluctantly imagine that the Spell had sent him into a past so distant that the desert was still the bottom of a sea. However, even that would not explain the strangeness of the vibrant sky above him.

"Just what kind of Seed did we enter?"

There was the sound of splashing, and the Sin of Solace calmly walked across the surface of the water to stand atop the wooden raft

again. He was perfectly dry and unbothered by the sudden change of scenery. There was a slight smile on his porcelain face.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?"

Sunny nodded silently, then suddenly looked intently at the spot where the apparition was standing.

The pale wood was dark and wet with water. When the mist had mysteriously disappeared, the raft must have overturned… revealing its bottom side.

And that underside was riddled with chaotic, manic lines.

They were runes, thousands of them, all blending into one demented tapestry. But… not only runes. Sunny recognized some of the crudely carved symbols, but others were entirely unfamiliar to him.

With a shudder, he noticed that there were even the familiar letters of the human language.

Translated by the Spell, all the symbols were repeating the same words:

"Wish wish wish be careful of wish wish be careful of what you wish for wish for wish for wish for wish WISH WISH BE CAREFUL OF WHAT YOU WISH FOR BE CAREFUL BE CAREFUL OF WHAT YOU WISH WISH WISH FOR…"

Sunny froze.

The words continued, spilling over the ancient wood as they broke and crisscrossed each other. Just like the single rune on the other side of the raft, it looked like they had been scratched into the incredibly durable wood by someone's nails. The lines were rough and frantic, but deep and forceful.

Sunny scowled, feeling an uncontrollable desire to move away from the deranged weave of runes. He felt a sense of dire madness radiating from them, and was irrationally wary of being infected by it. However, there was nowhere to move — the whole raft was covered by the mad litany of twisted symbols.

The part of it that he could see, the part where the Sin of Solace was standing calmly, and even the part where he was kneeling were all riddled with them.

Suddenly tense, Sunny looked away and glanced at the beautiful expanse of sparkling water once again.

…Somehow, it didn't seem as dreamy anymore.

Chapter-1236: Great River

'Be careful of what you wish for.'

Sunny considered these words despite feeling that thinking about them too hard was, perhaps, not too wise. The aura of madness radiating from the carvings was just too intense to ignore.

The sight of the thousands of runes carved into the underside of his makeshift raft was more than a little bit ominous. However, he was not very concerned about how urgent and demented they looked.

What really made him wary were the symbols themselves.

There were familiar runes, and unfamiliar symbols, too… although Sunny had extensively studied the various known languages of the Dream Realm, he could easily admit that there might have been writing systems that he had never seen.

Even if it was a little strange that they were not only completely unknown to him, but also bore no passing resemblance to any of the ones he had brushed against before.

However, how could there be the letters of human language here?

That was what really disturbed him.

'...Has someone from the Evacuation Army entered this Nightmare already?'

But no, that made no sense. The chances of an Awakened from his world entering the same Nightmare, finding the exact same piece of flotsam, and carving words from a dozen different languages — some of which even a researcher like Sunny had never stumbled upon, let alone mastered — into the wood before disappearing without a trace were infinitely small.

Not to mention that the markings did not seem fresh. They seemed like they had been made a long, long time ago.

So… what the hell was the meaning of this?

In fact, what the hell was the meaning of this entire Nightmare?

There had been no vision of reversed time when Sunny entered it. There were apparently millions of challengers who had entered it before him. There was no desert, no pyramid. Instead, there were the seven suns and a seemingly boundless expanse of water that sparkled under their light.

None of it made any sense at all. Even his shadows looked perplexed.

With a quiet groan, Sunny rubbed his temples and glanced at the Sin of Solace.

"What do you think about all this?"

The pale apparition looked at him with a smile.

"I am a part of you, so you should already be aware. No?"

Recognizing his own words, Sunny sighed and turned away.

"...Bastard."

The Sin of Solace laughed.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, trying not to look at the runes. Then, he studied the seven suns for some time.

'There's a lot of weirdness going on, and there's a lot of things that I don't know. So, let's think about what I do know.'

He was floating on a piece of wood in the middle of a vast body of water. However, that body itself was strange — it was seemingly as large as an ocean, with no land in sight, but composed of clear freshwater. All that water also seemed to be moving, flowing in a certain direction.

Freshwater and a uniform current… if Sunny disregarded the unimaginable scope, then wouldn't that make this place a river?

A river that was greater than the vastest of seas, but still a river.

So… did he know of any rivers like that?

Sunny shifted slightly.

'In fact… I do know about a river that was described as great.'

A river that existed outside of time and flowed endlessly from the future into the past… the Great River. It was mentioned in the description of the Stifled Scream. There was also a hint of a dreadful secret being hidden in its estuary.

Coincidentally — or maybe not — an estuary of some sort was also mentioned in the description of the Shroud of Graceless Dusk. According to it, the sybils had reached the Tomb of Ariel and embraced the Estuary after the voices of the gods grew silent. That was how they had fallen.

If the Estuary that the sybils had embraced was the estuary of the Great River, where a dreadful secret was hidden, then…

The Great River and the Tomb of Ariel were obviously connected.

But how?

Why would the Spell send Sunny into the waters of the Great River after touching one of the building blocks of the black pyramid?

And if this was indeed the Great River… then was he actually floating into the past right now?

Sunny remained motionless for a while, staring at the sparkling water and the seven radiant suns.

'Ah. My head hurts.'

He was pretty certain that he was right, and this was indeed the Great River that existed outside of time. That would explain why the

vision of Ariel's Tomb had been interrupted and why he had not seen the usual reversal of time at the start of the Nightmare.

Probably?

However, he still had no idea what being on the Great River meant, and what the Nightmare had to do with it.

An uncomfortable thought suddenly appeared in his mind.

'...I won't leave the Nightmare in the past if I take too long to conquer it, right?'

It would be really awkward if the current of the Great River took him so far into the past that he appeared in the prehistoric time of the waking world, where there were no Nightmare Creatures, but plenty of dinosaurs instead.

Then again, this river was supposed to exist outside of time. So it was just as likely that, should he survive the Nightmare, he would return to the waking world at the exact same moment that he had left it.

'Come to think of it…'

If this Nightmare had a strange relationship with the flow of time, then it could possibly explain how thirteen million challengers — way more than there were Awakened in the waking world — had ended up inside of it.

Maybe they had entered, entered, and would enter the Nightmare at various points in time before Sunny was alive, during his life, and long after he was dead.

That was a very confusing and incredibly troublesome thought, though…

Because it meant that in all that time, none of them had managed to conquer the Nightmare.

Sunny shivered.

'I'm just guessing, though. I might be completely wrong about the

whole thing. In fact, it's most likely that I am.'

He still needed more information.

Although Sunny had a very good memory and could easily remember the descriptions mentioning the Great River, he still decided to summon the runes and take another look at them.

The shimmering symbols appeared in the air in front of him.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Tyrant.

Shadow Cores: [5/7].

Shadow Fragments: [1236/5000].

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard]...

He searched for the runes of the Stifled Scream, but then froze.

A strange expression appeared on Sunny's face.

'...What?'

At the end of the long list of his Memories…

There was a string of runes that had not been there before.

Chapter-1237: The Answer Is

In the past, receiving a new Memory had always been an important and memorable event for Sunny. After all, with his advantage in deciphering the secrets of their enchantments, Memories were one of his most powerful tools. Sunny relied on his soul arsenal a lot.

However, as time had gone by, the importance of the Memories lessened to a large extent. Of course, he was still reliant on them — but these days, most of the rewards he received from the Spell were either too weak for his level of power or inferior to something he already possessed.

With rare exceptions, their worth lay mainly in expanding his repertoire of weaving and serving as fuel for the evolution of his Shadows.

So, getting a new Memory was not as memorable an event as it had been before.

…Still, it was not to the extent that Sunny could forget receiving one.

'What the hell?'

He seemed to be saying this phrase a lot recently.

Sunny was befuddled, but he couldn't deny what he saw — there was indeed a new string of runes at the end of the list of his Memories, one that he neither recognized nor had ever seen before.

He scowled, then threw a suspicious glance at the Sin of Solace.

After hesitating for a while, Sunny chose not to say anything and turned his attention back to the runes.

Not only had the new Memory appeared out of nowhere, but its name

also made him feel a deep sense of unease.

The runes read:

Memory: Key of the Estuary.

Sunny stared at it for a minute or two, disturbed. He had just been thinking about the Tomb of Ariel, the Great River, and its estuary… and now, this?

What did the name of the Memory mean?

Where did it come from?

And, more importantly… when did it appear?

He had not killed anything, or anyone, after entering the Nightmare. His Shadows were within his Soul Sea — they couldn't have slain a Nightmare Creature, either.

Except for Soul Serpent. But if Rain had been attacked by an abomination and Serpent killed it while defending her, the Spell should have still announced the kill and the acquisition of a Memory to Sunny. Yet he had not heard its voice since entering the Nightmare.

Had it happened while he was asleep?

With a grim expression, Sunny pulled his attention from the mysterious Memory and glanced at the list of his Shadows. Soul Serpent's runes were still bleak and lifeless, but they were there — which meant that Serpent had not been destroyed, at least.

It wouldn't have let anything happen to Rain without sacrificing itself first. So, Rain was most definitely alright… she had to be.

Suddenly, Sunny felt his heart turn cold and heavy. He looked at the beautiful expanse of sparkling water with a somber expression, his eyes full of concern and darkness.

Then, he slightly shook his head and looked down.

'Doesn't make any sense.'

What were the chances of a random abomination in the distant NQSC gifting Sunny with a Memory that was connected to the Great River? Why would it?

Pursing his lips, he let out a heavy sigh and turned his attention back to the runes. Concentrating on the Estuary Key made more shimmering symbols appear in the air.

As soon as Sunny started reading them, his expression changed.

Memory: Key of the Estuary.

Memory Rank: Supreme…

'Supreme?!'

His heart skipped a beat.

At the same time, Sunny's unease deepened.

He should have been excited to find himself in possession of such a powerful Memory. However, instead, all Sunny felt was a cold sense of dread. It was because he firmly believed that nothing in this world — two worlds, rather — was ever free. So, getting a Supreme Memory out of nowhere only made him feel apprehension.

'...Could Serpent even kill a Great Nightmare Creature?'

Soul Serpent was an Ascended Tyrant, just like Sunny. Sunny himself was not powerful enough to dare face a great abomination… his chances of surviving such a fight were not zero, but very close to it. The vessels of the Skinwalker were proof.

Frowning, Sunny swallowed his questions and continued to read.

Memory Tier: VI.

'Sixth Tier…'

He didn't even bother to consider the implications and turned to the

description… which was strangely short.

There were only several shimmering runes:

Memory Description: [The answer is oblivion.]

Sunny stared grimly at the short string of runes, perplexed.

'The answer?'

He was confused.

To what question?

Was oblivion the key to the Estuary? What did it mean?

Or was it not oblivion, but Oblivion — the Demon of Oblivion? But what did that easily forgotten daemon have to do with anything?

Sunny rubbed his face, then glanced at the enchantments of the mysterious Memory. However, to his disappointment, there were no more hints hidden in the runes. All he saw was:

Memory Enchantments: [???].

[???] Enchantment Description: [???].

And that was it.

There seemed to be only one enchantment, but it had no name and no description. It was just like the [Where is my eye?] enchantment of Weaver's Mask, which had not been named until Sunny used it.

There was one difference, though… [Where is my eye?] was an active enchantment, while the enchantment of the Estuary Key seemed to be a passive one.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'So… what is the probability that Soul Serpent had killed a Great Terror while I slept, and that the Memory received by me as a result has to do with the Great River?'

That was the only logical explanation, and yet, the logic of that explanation was highly questionable.

He remained motionless for a while, then sighed and summoned the Key of the Estuary.

Of course, it would have been more prudent to first study the mysterious Memory in the Soul Sea… yet, somehow, Sunny felt reluctant to touch it within his soul.

Soon, countless sparks of darkness swarmed around his palm, and then slowly formed into a jagged piece of black stone.

The jagged stone was utterly black and cool to the touch, reminding Sunny of the building blocks of the Tomb of Ariel. There were no features to it, no runes or images carved into its surface. It was just a rough, palm-sized chunk of stone that seemed like something one would randomly pick up from the ground.

Since the mysterious enchantment of the Estuary Key was a passive one, it was supposed to come into effect as soon as the Memory was summoned. However, if it was doing something, Sunny couldn't tell.

He did not feel any changes, neither in himself nor in the world.

'Ah… I feel like I'm going mad.'

He had been bombarded by more and more bizarre questions since the start of the Nightmare, and none of them had any answers.

There was also an answer that didn't seem to have a question.

Even the Sin of Solace had become a bit weird.

Uttering a quiet curse, Sunny concentrated and peered beneath the surface of the jagged black stone.

Even if the enchantment had no name and no description, he could still study its weave himself. After all, by now, he had some knowledge of weaving, as well as the ability to intuitively feel the purpose of various weaves.

Within the Estuary Key, there was a vast tapestry of ethereal strings. It was not the most complicated spellweave Sunny had ever seen — that would be the weave of Weaver's Mask — but it was still incredibly complex, and unimaginably intricate. An enchantment like that was hopelessly outside the scope of what he himself could create, at least.

Sunny was stunned.

However, he was not stunned by the intricacy or complexity.

Instead, what paralyzed him were the strings themselves.

Because, unlike the strings of soul essence that comprised the weaves of all Memories created by the Spell, these ones were not ethereally luminous and silvery white.

Instead, they were lightless and dark.

…Like something Sunny himself would create.

Chapter-1238: So Bizarre

The strings of the Memories created by the Spell were made out of soul essence… at least Sunny was convinced that they were. They were strings of ethereal, silver light.

The strings that Sunny himself weaved, however, were made out of shadow essence. Although they were a perfect substitute for the strings of light, they appeared entirely black. This was the reason why the weaves of the Memories he modified were like a patchwork of light and darkness.

…The weave of the Estuary Key, however, had no light at all. Every string of its vast and intricate tapestry was black, as if created out of shadow essence. It was just like the Siege Souvenir that Sunny had made and used to kill Goliath.

Sunny stared at the jagged piece of black stone, dumbfounded.

'What… what is the meaning of this?'

How could there be a Memory such as this if he had not created it?

Suddenly, there was cold sweat on his face.

'...Have I lost a part of my memories?'

Oblivion, oblivion… the answer was oblivion…

Sunny shifted, and his hand instinctively shot to the side, ready to grasp a weapon.

The Sin of Solace observed his panic with an amused smile.

A few seconds passed, then a few more. The Great River was peaceful and desolate, with not a threat in sight. Slowly, Sunny allowed himself to relax.

'Even if I somehow lost some memories, that wouldn't explain this damned Memory!'

Sunny was certain that he was not capable of creating a spellweave of such magnitude and complexity. He was nowhere near that level, as far as weaving was concerned…

Much more importantly, he knew for a fact that he was not capable of killing a Great Terror to collect six Supreme soul shards. Although, if this Memory was an artificial one, the soul shards could have come from six Great Beasts instead…

"Or six Sovereigns."

The Sin of Solace offered a suggestion with a mocking grin.

Sunny flinched, then glared at the apparition. His face was even paler than usual.

"Ha. Ha… very funny."

He was incapable of killing six Great Beasts, either. Or even one… most likely.

'So what does it mean?!'

Now, he really felt as if he was losing his mind. A Supreme Memory of the Sixth Tier appeared in his soul out of nowhere, and on top of that, it seemed to have been made from shadow essence.

It was just too bizarre!

Sunny groaned, grabbed his head and froze for a few minutes, thinking. After a while, his agitation lessened a little.

'It… it can still be explained. Even if the explanations are more than a little bit out there.'

First of all… the fact that the strings of the Estuary Key's weave were seemingly made out of shadow essence did not mean that it was Sunny who had created them. There could have been another shadow creature capable of weaving somewhere here.

In fact, Sunny had never received a Memory for killing a shadow creature. Who knew, maybe all Memories awarded for slaying shadows were like that?

So… it was still possible that somewhere in the waking world, Serpent had slain a Great Terror that had been a shadow creature once, and Sunny received the reward — which just happened to be tied to the Great River — while asleep.

Of course, it was extremely hard to believe that something like that had happened. But Sunny had been living with the [Fated] Attribute for many years now… if there was one thing he had learned, it was that he should never say never. All kinds of improbable coincidences were prone to happening to him.

There were two other explanations, as well.

One of them was that Sunny had somehow vastly improved his mastery of weaving, procured six Supreme soul shards, created the Key of the Estuary, and then forgotten all about it.

In the process, none of his other runes had changed, either — his Class, number of shadow fragments, collection of Memories, and the state of his Shadows were all the same as they had been before entering the Nightmare.

Well, that was not exactly true — one thing about him had indeed changed, and to a frightening degree. It was the Sin of Solace… the spirit of the cursed sword was entirely different from how it had been before. But that was the only discrepancy.

Nevertheless, the second explanation was even less believable than the first one. Too many things about it did not make any sense.

The third explanation had to do with the Great River, and the nature of time. Since time worked strangely in this Nightmare, it was… maybe?... possible that Sunny would create the Key of the Estuary in the future, but was somehow capable of already possessing it in the present.

He really didn't know that much about time… or rather, he knew just

as much about it as any person would. Sunny was not ignorant, but time itself was like a perversion of itself here. In any case, he had no idea how it worked on the Great River. So, who was to say that something like that couldn't happen?

The third explanation was the most bizarre… and yet, it somehow sounded more plausible than the other two.

Sunny dismissed the Estuary Key and silently stared at the vast expanse of flowing water in front of him. The seven suns were slowly traveling across the blue sky.

'So, in conclusion. I have no idea how I ended up on this river instead of in the Nightmare Desert, no knowledge about what the Great River actually is, no hints about what to do to conquer the Nightmare, and no clue where the others are. And on top of that, there is a mysterious Memory in my soul, and the Sin of Solace seems to have gone through a strange transformation.'

Sunny sighed as he enjoyed the beautiful view.

"Wonderful."

The Sin of Solace glanced at him with a smile.

"I'm glad you're in a good mood."

Then, the apparition took a tentative step back and grinned.

"But, Sunny… shouldn't you be paying more attention to the surroundings in a situation like this?"

Sunny frowned for a moment, then suddenly opened his eyes wide.

He had been distracted by the barrage of weird revelations and lulled into a false sense of security by the beautiful tranquility of the Great River…

Which was why he was a second too late to sense a vast shadow rising swiftly from the depths below him.

Summoning a Memory, he cursed and jumped high into the air.

In the next moment, giant jaws tore the surface of the water on both sides of his makeshift raft and closed, turning it into thousands of sharp splinters…

Chapter-1239: Sea Monster

The piece of flotsam had survived untold years of drifting on the currents of the Great River, and was so sturdy that Sunny couldn't easily leave a scratch on it despite being an Ascended Tyrant. Nevertheless, in just an instant, it was utterly obliterated.

The thousands of manic runes carved into its surface were destroyed. All that remained were tiny splinters, and even those disappeared a split second later, when the giant jaws snapped shut.

A massive serpentine head appeared from beneath the water, two monstrous eyes staring at Sunny with hunger and malevolent fury. Azure scales glistened in the sunlight, each one larger and thicker than the armor plates of a heavy military APC. The creature… was utterly enormous, ancient, and seemingly mad.

But Sunny was already in the air.

The height of his vertical jump was nothing to scoff at, so there was a lot of distance between him and the sharp narrow snout of the abomination. However, it did not matter, because the giant sea serpent continued to rise from the water, revealing its tower-like neck.

Its maw opened again like the gates of a dark abyss.

Another second later, it had already shot two dozen meters into the sky, threatening to swallow Sunny whole.

'Curse it… why does such a huge monster even want to eat a tiny morsel like me?!'

But then again, Nightmare Creatures were not really interested in human flesh. What they wanted were human souls… and as far as souls went, Sunny's was powerful and vast despite his modest size.

'Damn it!'

Sunny twisted in the air and kicked down. He was not trying to strike the sea serpent — instead, he used one of its fangs as a trampoline to catapult himself even further up. The timing of this desperate maneuver had to be incredibly precise, and the tiniest mistake meant death… but he was nothing if not quick. Especially when augmented by all five of his shadows.

And if the bastard lost a tooth as a result, well that would be even better.

However, the sea serpent's fang did not break from Sunny's powerful kick. In fact, it was almost the opposite — if not for Bone Weave, Sunny's leg might have snapped. The giant fang seemed utterly indestructible, like a monolith made of pristine crystal jade.

Wincing in pain, Sunny shot higher into the sky… and the creature followed. The serpent's long body continued to rise from the water, revealing its terrifying size and length. Just from the small part that could be seen, he judged that the abomination was at least a couple hundred meters in length.

It was a true leviathan.

'Gods…'

Sunny was not sure that he could escape high enough to save himself from the sea monster… or rather, the river monster. Even worse, he had nowhere to land. All around them, there was nothing but water.

He looked at the approaching maw in despair…

And then, the Memory he had summoned finally manifested itself into reality.

It was not the Sin of Solace, nor was it any other weapon.

Instead, it was a long and narrow needle forged out of black metal, with golden wire wrapped around one of its ends.

The Heavenly Burden.

Without hesitating even for a moment, Sunny drove the needle into his forearm, grimaced, and swiftly sent all his shadows to wrap themselves around it. Instantly, the speed of his ascent increased tremendously.

The Heavenly Burden did not give a person the ability to fly, but it did make the things it pierced float upward. Usually, the speed with which one drifted into the sky was not too great, but with the augmentation of five shadows, things changed.

The maw of the azure leviathan, which had been drawing closer to Sunny at a frightening pace, slowly started to fall behind. He was ascending into the air faster than the serpent was rising from the water.

The surface of the Great River already seemed rather distant.

'D—damnation… why do I feel like a hot air balloon?'

After a few more minutes, the giant jaws snapped shut once again, and the leviathan stopped, staring upward with dark, hungry madness burning in its huge inhuman eyes.

About fifty meters of its long body had already risen from the waters of the Great Rivers, looming above them like a tower of glistening azure scales. Streams of water flowed from the long ridge of its dorsal fin, with curved spikes protruding from it like giant blades.

The monstrous sea serpent… was rather magnificent.

Or it would have been, if not for the clear signs of decay and corruption marrings its massive body.

Its eyes, which had been golden once, were now dim and cloudy, with lines of crimson pus spreading from them toward the long snout. The azure scales were covered by countless scars, some of them missing entirely to reveal pale, desiccated flesh. Pieces of rotten meat were stuck between its dark fangs.

The ancient serpent stared at Sunny, and Sunny stared back.

'This… is not good.'

The leviathan was large enough to be a titan. Granted, dwellers of the depths were often larger than their land counterparts… but if it was indeed a titan, then Sunny was in big trouble.

Because titans had all kinds of ways to kill someone like him from afar.

Shuddering, he concentrated and peered through the azure scales. He needed to understand what the creature's Rank and Class were…

What Sunny saw left him shaken and revolted.

Darkness… nothing but vile darkness, with only one pronounced node that was the source of it.

His mouth was suddenly dry.

'...A Great Beast.'

Still being carried into the sky by the Heavenly Burden, Sunny let out a stifled laugh.

'Well, that's… unexpected.'

He had never thought that he would be glad to see a Great Beast one day.

But he was.

A Great Beast was a harrowing creature of indescribable destructive power, but it was still fundamentally a Beast. And Beasts did not usually possess any unnatural powers.

So, while the Azure Serpent was without a doubt an absolutely disastrous foe for Sunny, meeting it was still better than encountering a Titan, a Terror, a Tyrant… or even a Devil of a lesser Rank. Because the creature couldn't do anything to him while Sunny remained in the sky.

'Ah… but there is a problem…'

Forcing himself to look away from the towering monstrosity, Sunny

studied the vast expanse of the Great River.

There was nothing but water, no matter in which direction he looked.

He had nowhere to land.

Chapter-1240: Sunny Zeppelin

The giant Great Beast was growing smaller and smaller as Sunny rose higher into the sky. The winds were howling, and he was slowly starting to feel apprehensive about how long it would take him to fall back down. The view was simply breathtaking… but even from such a high vantage point, Sunny could not see a single piece of land.

There were no islands, no continents, and no ships. There was not even another piece of flotsam.

He sighed.

'What a predicament.'

"Enjoying the view?"

Sunny flinched and craned his neck, looking at the Sin of Solace.

His identical copy was calmly standing on thin air, looking down at him. The wind was playing with the apparition's long black hair.

Sunny frowned

'I... really need to get a haircut.'

"You're ignoring me now? Ungrateful."

He glared at the apparition silently, then asked:

"How are you doing that? Why aren't you falling?"

A wicked smile appeared on the face of the cursed spirit.

"It's because, unlike you, I'm not weighed down by sin."

Sunny scoffed.

"Bastard… it's literally in your name…"

The two were silent for a few moments, giving him ample time to enjoy the fact of just how insane he had become. After a while, the Sin of Solace pointed down.

"Why bother resisting? Here's an idea… just go jump into this beast's maw. Haven't you heard the stories about people traveling inside a sea creature's belly? With your luck, it will definitely bring you to somewhere pleasant."

Sunny stared at the porcelain face of the apparition.

"If I die, you die too, you know?"

The Sin of Solace grinned.

"Maybe I would rather die than spend more time in your company. Have you ever thought about that?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, then looked away.

'He's not real… he's just a part of me… since when am I this irritating?'

Sighing, he summoned the Dark Wing. Soon, a translucent cloak appeared on his back and turned into a blur. The shadows moved, flowing from the Heavenly Burden to cover it in darkness.

Illuminated by the light of seven suns, Sunny followed the current of the Great River as he glided forward. To his right, the world was painted in hues of lilac by the light of dawn. To his left, the water was like a sea of burning blood because of the crimson dusk. All around him, the blue sky was suffused with the bright radiance of the day.

The Sin of Solace calmly walked across that sky, following him. His hands were clasped behind his back.

'There has to be something — anything — in this Nightmare. It can't just all be water.'

Sunny was pretty sure that there would be some place where he could land. Otherwise, the trial was too unreasonable… anyone without Memories like the Essence Pearl and the Nimble Catch would be doomed. The Spell was not an executioner.

Of course, with his luck, he might have been sent thousands of kilometers away from the nearest piece of land. That would not be the first time Sunny found himself on the receiving end of truly terrible fortune.

There was only one way to find out.

…Well, actually, there were a couple. He could try surviving the [Where is my eye?] enchantment for the third time. And he would, if there was no other way.

The giant sea monster below followed Sunny with its cloudy eyes, and then dove back into the water. However, its vast shadow remained, moving slowly just below the surface. It was keeping pace with the flying human.

Sunny's expression grew bleak.

'Not willing to let go, huh?'

Did he offend the serpent's ancestors in his past life?

Time went by. The sea serpent continued to follow Sunny, raising its head above the water from time to time to throw a chilling look in his direction. At some point, Sunny removed the black needle from his forearm and allowed himself to glide down for a while.

There was a Great Beast waiting for him in the river… and if there was one below, there could easily be one above. Being attacked by a flying abomination was the last thing Sunny wanted to happen — but if it did happen, he wanted to at least have the opportunity to dive back into the water and try his luck in the depths. Maybe the two abominations would fight with each other instead.

This was why he dared neither rise too high above the water nor get too low.

Sunny felt tense, somber… and a bit exasperated.

'No, really. What kind of messed-up situation is this?'

He had turned into a blimp!

After gliding down for a while, he winced and pushed the black needle back into his forearm.

And so it continued.

The Great Beast stubbornly followed, always staying precisely below Sunny. The hours slowly went by. Sometimes, he would rise, and sometimes, he would descend. The Heavenly Burden continued to poke small holes in his skin, which then immediately healed thanks to the [Living Stone] trait of the Shell.

Sunny grew angry.

Then, he grew depressed.

Then, he grew bored.

Eventually, he started to enjoy the feeling of flying through this beautiful world of radiant sunlight and shining water. A small smile appeared on his face.

There was a great abomination waiting to gobble Sunny up, and yet, he felt strangely peaceful. How many people out there dreamed of being able to fly?

'...Maybe I did lose my mind.'

He was happy that the Sin of Solace, at least, was keeping his mouth shut.

The seven suns slowly moved across the sky. Eventually, the dawn to his right dissipated, giving way to night. The seventh sun rose above the water and crawled west across the firmament, followed by a spreading darkness. The sun to his left drowned in the crimson water and disappeared, soon followed by another.

One by one, all seven suns disappeared beyond the western horizon, and the sky became completely black.

There was no moon, and no stars.

However, soon after absolute darkness consumed the world, the waters of the Great River themselves began to emanate a soft, shimmering radiance. Sunny held his breath, stunned by the sublime beauty of this dark, luminous world. The whole boundless expanse of the Great River was now suffused with faint, but beautiful light.

It was as though…

As though the seven suns were now somewhere far below, the soft echo of their light barely reaching the world through the unfathomable mass of water.

'How pretty…'

Sunny stared at the softly shining expanse of water for a while. Then, his expression turned dull.

If there was one flaw to this ethereally beautiful scene, it was the dark shape beneath the surface of the flowing water, and the two giant eyes staring at him with hunger and madness.

The day was over, and the night had come…

But the damned Great Beast was still patiently waiting for him below.

Looking at the head of the ancient sea serpent, Sunny sighed.

'I wonder how many days I can survive...'

Chapter-1241: Dark Island

Sunny glided through the dark sky above the luminous expanse of softly shining water. The wind was caressing his skin, and tranquil silence ruled the world. If not for the need to pierce himself with the sharp needle over and over again, he would have found the situation relaxing.

Of course, there was also the monstrous sea serpent that patiently pursued him, staring at the perfectly black canvas of the night sky with cloudy eyes.

He also had to constantly remain on high alert — there was no telling what else could attack him from above.

After a while, Sunny let out a sigh.

'How tiresome.'

He was starting to miss the days of plummeting into the Sky Below. At least he had the dead mimic to sit on back then. Now, there was nowhere for him to rest — Sunny continued to fly forward, surrounded by nothing except empty air.

He had the Sin of Solace with him instead of Mordret, too. It was really hard to tell which one of them was worse company.

"What? Have you lost… I strongly protest against this comparison!"

The apparition glanced at him with contempt, then looked away.

Sunny sighed again.

"Yeah, yeah… you are way more handsome than that guy. Sorry. I went too far."

The Sin of Solace scoffed, and they continued forward in silence.

After a long while, the faint radiance of the flowing water grew a little dimmer. The eastern horizon brightened, and then, the first of the suns appeared from below in a crown of lilac hues.

A new day was starting.

The soft light suffusing the Great River slowly dissipated, and the seven suns appeared from below the water one after another. Soon, the western horizon was once again wreathed in the crimson flames of dusk.

Everywhere else, it was bright day.

Sunny stared at the Great Beast below him with resentment. He was tempted to summon Morgan's Warbow and start turning the ancient serpent into a pincushion. Even if the might of his arrows was not enough to pierce the azure scales of the creature, he was sure that they would at least irritate it.

Why should Sunny be the only one feeling endless frustration?

However, doing so was only going to consume his essence. He wasn't willing to waste it needlessly in a situation where it was impossible to tell what would happen next.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny steeled his will and continued flying above the water.

An hour went by. Then, one more.

Actually, Sunny had no idea if those were really hours — the seven suns shining above the Great River were too bizarre and unreliable to use them for measuring the time. He just guessed how much of it had passed based on intuition, but he could have easily been wrong.

In any case… more time flowed past him. Or was it Sunny who was flowing through time? Questions like this were driving him mad.

'I am really starting to…'

Sunny suddenly froze and looked at a certain spot on the Great River.

There, a great distance away… a black dot had finally appeared atop the sparkling water. His heart skipped a beat.

'Land?'

He lingered for a moment, then glanced at the long shadow hiding beneath the surface of the water right below him. Then, he changed the direction of his flight slightly and sped up, hoping to reach the black dot as soon as possible.

There was no guarantee that finding a place to land would save him from the great abomination. But maybe he would be able to rest, at least.

The wind whistled in Sunny's ears as he glided along the current of the Great River, moving — perhaps — further into the past.

Slowly, the dot grew larger, and he was able to see a few details of what it was.

In front of him, still some distance away, was a dark island. The island was not very large — no more than a kilometer across — and consisted entirely of black, weathered rock. It had steep slopes, with deep grooves and twisting fissures running through them.

There were vast patches of green moss scattered across the surface of the island, as well as towering outcroppings of something that resembled tarnished silver. The glistening edges were sharp and jagged.

Sunny felt a bit of hope.

The island was not large, but it was large enough to pose an obstacle for the sea monster. If the abomination wanted to follow Sunny to the surface, it would have to leave the water entirely — and fighting on land would be very advantageous to Sunny.

Maybe the ancient serpent would not climb out of the river at all.

But even if it did, it would be out of its element. With Sunny, Saint, Nightmare, Imp, and the five shadows… maybe they stood a chance of driving the creature away, or even killing it.

The Sin of Solace must have grown much stronger, as well. After all, the [Hideous Truth] enchantment of the jade blade promised immense power to those who succumbed to its madness… and, judging by how real the sword wraith seemed, Sunny had met quite a lot of the requirements.

Plus… Sunny could find clues about the nature of the Nightmare on the island. Right now, he was suffering the most from the lack of information. Knowledge was the origin of power, so he couldn't miss a chance to acquire some.

'Let's hope that the old snake is not going to follow me to land…'

Sunny removed the Heavenly Burden from his arm and started slowly descending in the direction of the dark island. The closer he got to it, the more details he could make out. The steep slopes of the island were craggy, with their lower parts encased in silver. There were numerous barnacles growing on the tarnished metal, with waves of water foaming as they splashed against them from time to time.

There were also massive chains rising from the water and disappearing in the fissures higher up the slopes.

Sunny frowned.

The island was very strange… that was a given. However, there was something about that strangeness that made him feel uneasy.

The monstrous serpent, too, seemed to have grown wary as they drew closer to the weathered hill of dark rock.

Sunny's eyes suddenly narrowed.

'Could it be…'

He hesitated for a few moments, and then tried to peer through the surface of the island.

A split second later, Sunny cursed and hurriedly drove the Heavenly Needle back into his skin.

In the next moment, the island quaked and moved as a titanic head

slowly rose from beneath the waves to stare at the ancient sea serpent with a giant, unmoving eye.

…What Sunny saw beneath the weathered black rock was an ocean of vile darkness, and two nodes from where the Corruption had spread throughout the whole enormous creature.

The entire island… was simply the carapace of a colossal Great Monster.

Chapter-1242: Cataclysmic Battle

Sunny stared at the colossal reptilian head that had risen from below the waves. There were streams of water flowing down from it like roaring waterfalls, and brands of tarnished silver encasing it like armor. The monster's eyes were like murky lakes, and its massive beak was like the ram of an oceanic battleship.

Of course, there was no vessel in the waking world that could compare with the destructive power of that beak.

The thing that Sunny had assumed to be an island was, in fact, the shell of a giant, monstrous black turtle.

He froze, stunned by the sheer size of the Great Monster.

'...And I thought that that sea snake was enormous.'

The sea serpent that had been following Sunny was, indeed, quite large — it was easily larger than the Fallen Titan Goliath, whom Sunny had killed during the siege of Falcon Scott. However, the creature's body was still only a couple hundred meters long.

The monstrous turtle, meanwhile, spanned more than a kilometer. In front of it, the serpent looked like a little snake.

And yet, it seems undeterred.

The azure serpent had risen its head out of the water, too, and was staring at the Great Monster in front of it with its mad, cloudy eyes.

The two Nightmare Creatures observed each other.

Sunny, meanwhile, was cursing his fate.

'Damn it… damn it! I was hoping to step on something solid again!'

Instead of a safe harbor, he found an abomination that was even more harrowing than the one waiting to swallow him whole.

"You can still step on that turtle, you know."

The Sin of Solace grinned.

Sunny spared him a dark glance, then turned to look at the two abominations.

At that moment, the giant turtle lowered its head a little and let out a low, threatening huff — which sounded like rolling thunder. Water was still flowing off its black scales, and its murky eyes were slowly igniting with dark silver light.

It was clearly not happy that another Nightmare Creature had invaded its territory and disturbed its sleep.

The azure serpent stared at it for a few moments more, then turned its snout and threw a deranged gaze at Sunny.

'What is that old snake thinking? Turn your tail and run, lunatic!'

Sunny still clearly remembered the ease with which the Carapace Centurions had slaughtered the Carapace Scavengers. A Monster was much more powerful and deadly than a mere Beast, no matter the Rank… if the sea serpent had any sense left, it would retreat to avoid angering the black turtle.

Which was good news for Sunny. Even though he had not managed to find shelter from the abomination on the shell of the Great Monster, the Great Monster could still rid him of the dreadful pursuer.

The turtle did not seem to have noticed Sunny, either. If things turned out well…

But, of course, they did not.

Despite being much smaller than the Great Monster in front of it, and

presumably much weaker, the azure serpent let out a mad roar and dove into the water, swimming toward the colossal turtle with stunning speed. The giant blades protruding from its back cut the surface of the river and left a trail of white foam in their wake.

Sunny was a little startled.

'...Does it want to eat me that bad?'

The monstrous armored turtle, however, was unfazed. Its giant flippers moved, and it propelled itself forward with surprising speed. Its beak opened, and an indescribable sound exploded from its maw, making the world shake.

The calm surface of the Great River suddenly turned chaotic and tumultuous, as if in the middle of a raging hurricane. Giant whirlpools formed, powerful enough to swallow alloy vessels whole.

Sunny was almost thrown from the sky by the violent force of the abomination's battle cry.

'Argh…'

The azure serpent and the black turtle clashed below him, and a tremendous fountain of water suddenly shot into the air. The turtle was much more powerful and deadly, but the serpent was faster — it nimbly evaded the harrowing beak and opened its maw, trying to sink its fangs into the gargantuan scales of the enemy's neck.

However, the dreadful fangs simply slid off the tarnished silver encasing it.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, awed by the cataclysmic fury of the clash between two great abominations. The forces being unleashed below him… were probably enough to erase an entire siege capital from the face of the world.

Shuddering, he imagined what would happen if two such creatures appeared in NQSC. Would the largest city of humanity survive such a catastrophe?

…It probably would, if barely. The Sovereigns might have abandoned

Antarctica, but they were bound to do something if the seat of their power came under threat. Bastion and Ravenheart were important, yes, but the Northern Quadrant was still the heartland of humanity.

At least that was what Sunny wanted to believe.

'What am I thinking about?'

The waters of the Great River were already painted red by blood around the two clashing abominations.

Sunny would have loved to watch the azure serpent die, but he couldn't miss the chance to slip away. If he failed to escape from the two great abominations now, he might never get it again.

Turning away, he flew forward as fast as he could.

Behind him, the world was shuddering, and the water was roaring as it rose in giant waves.

'Gods…'

Sunny gritted his teeth and refused to look back.

Gradually, the sounds of the titanic battle grew quieter and quieter. And then, he couldn't hear anything at all.

He let out a shaky breath.

'That… I knew that Third Nightmares were absolutely lethal. But isn't it a bit too much?'

Was he supposed to battle Great Nightmare Creatures as a mere Ascended? What kind of perverted logic was that?

Suddenly in a somber mood, Sunny sighed and looked at the Sin of Solace.

"What do you think?"

The sword wraith smiled.

"I think you are going to die of hunger before finding land. Oh… or

you can go fishing in the river and be eaten by the fish instead. There's always a choice!"

Sunny grimaced.

'Why did I even ask?'

He continued to follow the current of the Great River, flying north… into the past.

Eventually, the seven suns drowned again, suffusing the water with their light. The sky was black and devoid of stars.

The world was silent.

Sunny tiredly closed his eyes.

'...Can't sleep. Falling asleep might kill me.'

He stared at the expanse of softly shining water beneath him, then blinked a couple of times.

'What… the hell… how is this possible?!'

A familiar shadow was hiding beneath the waves below him.

The azure serpent was back. There were hints of blood in the water around it, but the damned creature was indeed there, still waiting to devour Sunny.

'Did it escape from that giant turtle?!'

Struggling to believe in it, Sunny turned around and looked back.

Of course, the place where the two abominations had battled was too far away for him to see anything.

But… he did notice something else.

Somewhere out there, upstream, almost too distant to be noticed… a tiny spark of pure white light was glistening above the bluish-green, luminous waters. It was hard to notice because of the soft glow of the Great River at night, but it was certainly there.

Sunny held his breath for a moment.

'I shouldn't get my hopes up. Right?'

He slowed down, and then came to a halt. The Sin of Solace stopped, too, looking at him with a detached expression.

'Still… I must make sure…'

Sunny rubbed his face, glanced at the azure serpent once again, and then sent himself flying back.

'Let's see if you want to meet that turtle again, old snake!'

Chapter-1243: Searching for Light

By the time Sunny flew close enough to distinguish the source of the white spark, it had already disappeared. However, finding the source was not too hard — there were not a lot of things that could be distinguished from the empty expanse of flowing water on the Great River, after all.

By then, it was already morning. The suns were slowly rising from below, and the world was enveloped in the dim glow of twilight. The soft radiance of the shimmering water had dissipated, making it easier for Sunny to see colors.

Hovering high above the current, he froze. There was a stunned expression on his face.

'...How is this possible?'

Far below him, a vast span of the Great River was painted red. Blood was clouding the clear water, and the polluted patch of it was at least half a dozen kilometers across. From high up, it looked as if a bloody flower was slowly blooming in the middle of the river.

At the center of the red patch… a familiar Great Monster was floating lifelessly, the silver bands encasing its neck broken and bent.

The black turtle was dead.

There was a vicious wound at the spot where its neck met its body. The wound was large enough to be a tunnel, with rivers of blood still flowing out of it into the water. The equally gruesome exit wound was all the way across the monster's massive body, just below one of its armored flippers.

Shaken, Sunny lingered for a while, and then looked down, at the spot where his pursuer was hiding beneath the water. At that moment, the azure serpent rose its head above the surface and stared at Sunny with mad fury burning in its cloudy eyes.

The Great Beast looked battered and maimed, with several huge chunks of flesh missing from its long neck… but it was undeniably alive.

He had thought once that the azure serpent was like a little snake in front of the colossal turtle. But from the looks of it, that little snake had managed to burrow into the body of the larger monster, tear it from the inside, and escape back into the river to catch up to Sunny.

'The old snake must be a queen… king?... of Beasts. It actually took down a Monster…'

He was slightly impressed.

But mostly, he was disturbed. Being pursued by a Great Beast was already bad enough, but now that he knew that the azure serpent was a fearsome existence among the creatures of its Class, the situation seemed even worse.

'Damnation…'

Sunny and the ancient leviathan stared at each other some more, and then he turned back to the island-sized corpse of the black turtle.

In any case, now that he saw the result of the battle between the two great abominations, he had to admit that the source of the white spark had to be hidden somewhere on the dead turtle's shell. There was simply no other place anywhere around that could have produced it.

Sunny observed the carcass of the Great Monster for a while, not daring to descend yet. After thinking for a while, he summoned Morgan's Warbow and made a black arrow appear on its string.

Then, he ordered one of his shadows to wrap itself around the arrow, drew the string, and released it.

The arrow shot through the air and struck the green moss covering the monster's shell. Piercing the layer of soft moss, it then hit the weathered black rock and splintered without leaving even a scratch on its surface.

The arrow was destroyed, but the shadow had already been transported on the dark island.

The gloomy guy looked around, shivered, and then glanced at the sky with a resigned expression. His resentful gaze seemed to deal damage directly to Sunny's conscience.

Sunny shifted a little.

'What are you staring at? I have a very clear conscience! The clearest conscience in two worlds…it's a flaw of mine…'

The Sin of Solace, who was standing by his side, quietly chuckled.

Ignoring the apparition, Sunny commanded the gloomy shadow to go and explore. Then, he looked at the world through its eyes.

The surface of the black turtle's shell was indeed like an island. There were patches of moss covering the weathered rock, while the rock itself was rough and uneven. It was littered with mounds, deep gorges, and even depressions filled with water that looked like small lakes.

Here and there, jagged pieces of tarnished silver could be seen. From what Sunny could tell, the Great Monster had been somehow fashioned with a battle armor of sublime silver in the past… perhaps thousands of years ago. Now, the silver armor was dull and covered with a dark patina.

Most of it was gone, at least on the surface — only the edges of the shell, the neck, the head, and the flippers were still encased in vast bands of the precious metal. The huge chains Sunny had seen before served to fasten the armor to the creature's shell.

He did not want to study the nature of the dead abomination in detail right now, though. First, he wanted to find out where the white light had come from.

Soon, the shadow noticed something.

In the middle of a large patch of moss, there was a spot where it had been burned away, revealing the rock surface beneath. The rock itself was covered by ash and soot.

Most importantly… there was a palm print in the ash. A human palm print.

Sunny's heart suddenly started to beat faster.

The gloomy shadow seemed excited, too. It sped up, gliding across the dark island and diving into the deep fissures in the rock shell from time to time.

And after diving into one of the more shallow gorges, it saw something that made it freeze.

Out there in the shade of the fissure, leaning her back on the uneven black rock…

A young woman with silver hair was sitting on the ground. Her black clothes were singed and torn, and there was a wild look in her striking grey eyes. She was holding a piece of strange-looking roasted meat in her hands, sinking her teeth into it with a determined expression.

Both her fingers and lips were covered in grease.

It was Nephis.

As Sunny and the gloomy shadow were staring at her in stunned silence, she suddenly shifted, raised her head and looked directly at the shadow.

Her eyes widened a little.

Forgetting to chew, Neph lingered for a moment…

And then awkwardly waved at the shadow with a greasy hand.

Chapter-1244: Damn Great Steak

'It's actually her…'

Sunny did not want to admit it, but he was incredibly excited. A small smile appeared on his face, and he let out a long sigh.

Far below, his shadow waved back at Nephis.

He was happy, and not only because it was Neph whom he had found. Sunny was also happy to find anyone at all… after days spent in solitude, he was starting to fear that the strangeness of the Great River was much more dire than he had thought, and that he was actually sent into an entirely different Nightmare — or perhaps epoch — than the other members of the cohort.

In fact, he had been suppressing the gnawing fear of being the only human in this flowing world.

'Thank the gods.'

Under the watchful gaze of the azure serpent, Sunny retrieved the Heavenly Burden and glided down in a wide spiral. He was still wary of the great abomination, but had no choice except to land. It was a good thing, too… after spending two days drifting through the empty sky, he longed to stand on something solid again.

The small puncture wound left behind by the black needle was completely healed by the time Sunny reached the stone shell of the dead behemoth.

To his relief, the ancient serpent did not follow him onto the island. It stayed in the water, staring at the tiny human with hungry madness — luckily, looks could not kill.

Well, at least this Great Beast's gaze could not kill. There were all kinds of Nightmare Creatures and Aspects out there, though…

As soon as the soles of his shoes touched the weathered rock, Sunny let out a satisfied sigh. Then, he dismissed the Dark Wing, bent down to grab the edge of the fissure in front of him, and jumped down.

A few moments later, Sunny landed in front of Nephis. The gloomy shadow slid off the wall and attached itself to his feet.

The two of them stared at each other for a bit.

Then, Sunny grinned.

"That smells delicious. Where did you get fresh meat?"

Nephis tilted her head and blinked.

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A few minutes later, Sunny and Nephis were sitting opposite each other inside the narrow fissure, finishing the last of the meat she had roasted. The Covetous Coffer was standing nearby in the form of an alloy chest, its lid open — there was not much food inside by now, but there was still some salt and spices left. With the help of seasoning, the meat tasted sublime.

Not that it was easy to chew. Sunny's teeth were incredibly tenacious due to Bone Weave, and yet, he had to augment himself with a few shadows just to take a bite… and yet, he was thankful for that meat. Without Neph making a fire to roast it, he might not have found her so soon, or even ever at all.

'It really tastes amazing...'

Finished with his portion, Sunny glanced at his greasy hands with a bit of regret, and then carefully licked his fingers. Then, he looked at Nephis and smiled.

"Hey… did we really just eat the meat of a Great Monster?"

How had his life turned out this way? It was a bit too ridiculous.

She nodded and brought the Endless Spring to her lips, drinking greedily.

"Yeah… I carved it myself. After the sea serpent left."

Hearing this, Sunny shifted awkwardly.

As it turned out, Nephis had been on the shell of the black turtle the whole time. At first, she had appeared within the mist, just like Sunny — but after the mist dissipated, she found herself standing on the surface of the dark island, with no one else in sight.

Neph had felt that something was very wrong almost instantly, but it took her a few hours to realize that the rocky island beneath her feet was actually the carapace of a titanic abomination. Then, she slowly explored the shell of the black turtle while trying her best not to awaken the Great Monster from its slumber.

On the second day, the sea serpent had suddenly attacked, waking the turtle up and initiating a harrowing battle. Nephis had no choice but to hide in one of the fissures and hold on for dear life while being battered, doused with water, and tossed around.

The pressure and the shockwaves of the furious battle between two great abominations almost killed her — that was why her clothes were in such a sorry state. Eventually, though, the serpent managed to burrow into the turtle's flesh and kill it from the inside. After killing the monster, it left.

At that point, Nephis recovered a little, then dove down into the water to carve out some meat to satiate her hunger, as well as quench her thirst.

Sunny coughed awkwardly.

"About that… I'm sorry."

She raised an eyebrow, looking at him in confusion.

"Sorry? Why?"

He scratched the back of his head.

"Well… I also entered the Nightmare within the mist. Only I was still in the water once it dissipated, on a piece of flotsam. And there was this serpent trying to eat me. So, I escaped into the sky and flew downstream for a while, with the serpent following. Eventually, I stumbled on this turtle… and therefore, so did the sea snake. You, uh...

you know the rest…"

A strange expression appeared on Neph's face. She stared at him silently, making Sunny let out a nervous laugh.

"Actually, I was right above you, high in the sky, when they started fighting. We almost missed each other! Luckily, I noticed your flames from afar the next night, and came back."

He lingered for a moment, and then smiled.

"So, it all ended well. Now we are both stuck here."

Then, the smile froze on his face.

Sunny remained motionless for a bit, then looked away and cleared his throat.

"Oh, by the way… that sea serpent? Yeah… I might have accidentally led it back here, again. It's currently circling the turtle. Did I say that I was sorry?"

Nephis stared at him for a while, then lowered her head and covered her face with a palm. Sunny could have sworn that he heard her mumble something under her breath.

But he must have heard wrong, right?

There was no way Nephis would say...

"Damnation..."

Chapter-1245: Smashing Problems with a Hammer

Climbing out of the fissure, the two of them — and the ominous figure of the Sin of Solace — studied the calm surface of the Great River. By now, it seemed like a sea of blood. The patch of red water surrounding the dead behemoth was growing larger as it was slowly washed away.

Just then, an ominous shadow moved through the blood, and a giant, cloudy eye rose from the red liquid to stare at them with hatred and burning malice. Sunny shivered and felt the desire to take a step back.

Nephis remained unmoved.

After a while, she spoke in a somber tone:

"...Strong."

He sighed.

"It is a Great Beast. Of course, it's strong."

At that moment, the Sin of Solace smiled.

As they escaped the suffocating gaze of the azure serpent by jumping back into the fissure, the sword wraith spoke:

"But… isn't it just a Great Beast? Where is your fighting spirit, Sunny? Go! Kill it! Like you always do..."

Sunny threw an irritated glance at him and thought:

'Shut the hell up.'

The apparition laughed.

"Why? Can't I make a joke? Of course, a pathetic waste of a Divine Aspect like you has no hope of surviving a fight with this creature."

It grinned and added:

"That is why it's funny."

Sunny frowned and glared at the Sin of Solace, then started to think of a response. However, at that moment, Neph's voice distracted him from the conversation:

"Sunny? Who are you talking to?"

Startled, he flinched slightly and turned to her. His face grew slightly more pale than usual.

"You… you heard that? I spoke it aloud?"

She lingered for a moment, then nodded.

Sunny let out a small laugh and scratched his head, feigning embarrassment. In truth, he was a little frightened — it seems that the effect of the Sin of Solace on his mind was not as tame as he had thought.

'Damn it.'

"That… my primary weapon Memory has a peculiar enchantment. Basically, it's a voice that doesn't miss a chance to explain how wrong everything I do is. Right… something like that."

Nephis stared at him for a while, and then a hint of a smile appeared on her face.

"Oh."

Sunny frowned.

"Wait, why are you smiling? It's very annoying!"

She simply shook her head.

"It's nothing. I was… just suddenly reminded of an old fairy tale I once heard."

He gave her a dubious look.

"Really? What is that fairy tale about?"

Nephis pondered for a bit, as if trying to recall, then said with uncertainty:

"It is about a mischievous doll who ran away from home. Every time the doll lied, his nose would grow bigger. And there was a cricket who followed the wooden boy around, trying to explain what is right and what is wrong to him."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, perplexed. What kind of weird story was that? And why would a doll be alive? Was it actually an Echo? Or a Nightmare Creature?

He frowned.

"That's one strange fairy tale. I do see why you would remember it, though, not that I have any problems with the length of my nose. So… how does it end?"

Nephis thought for a while.

"I guess the doll learns how to be a good boy and returns home with the cricket? That is not the original ending, though."

Sunny felt a little better about himself after hearing that. Curious, he raised an eyebrow and asked:

"Yeah? What happens to the doll in the original, then?"

She sat down and shrugged with an indifferent expression.

"He kills the cricket with a hammer, then gets hanged from a tree and dies."

Sunny's eyes twitched.

'What the hell?'

Lowering himself to the ground, he scoffed.

"That doesn't even make sense. Isn't that doll made of wood? Why would he die after being hanged from a tree? Ridiculous… not to mention that a talking wooden doll would have been at least a Demon. There's no way a Demon would die from being hanged."

He looked at Nephis and abruptly realized how ridiculous that conversation was. Sunny cleared his throat, and then added:

"Anyway… that Memory of mine has grown stronger once we entered the Nightmare. I have a couple of ideas why, but am not certain yet. So, that peculiar enchantment has become more annoying, too. I guess what I am trying to say is… don't mind me."

However, he couldn't help but glance at the Sin of Solace and add with a bit of venom in his voice:

"As for the fairy tale… now that we established that the doll wouldn't have died from hanging, I must admit — I wouldn't mind smashing that annoying cricket with a hammer and watching it die."

The apparition mockingly raised an eyebrow. Neph, meanwhile, frowned slightly and asked:

"Why do you keep looking to the side when talking about that enchantment?"

Sunny froze.

"Well… that… at first, there was only a voice. But now there's an illusory figure following me, too. In fact, it looks exactly like me, and uses my own voice to berate me. It's fine, though. Just… annoying."

Nephis remained silent before asking in an even tone:

"So… there are two Sunnys here right now?"

Sunny grimaced, then nodded with a bit of reluctance.

"In a sense. One is just a foul-mouthed hallucination, though."

Neph stared at him for a while with a funny expression.

Then, she tilted her head slightly…

And stared at him some more.

Sunny suddenly felt a bit weird under that gaze.

"...What? Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not crazy!"

No… what was it hidden in the depths of her calm grey eyes? Was it… amusement?!

Nephis suddenly took a deep breath, and then shook her head.

"I know that you are not crazy. That Memory should be the Sin of Solace, right? It is tied to Ariel — and, therefore, to the Tomb of Ariel. Even though the pyramid doesn't seem to exist in this Nightmare, it might come in handy."

Sunny slowly exhaled.

"Right."

Nephis had access to the list of his Memories, so she would know about the Sin of Solace.

But that reminded him…

Growing serious, Sunny said in a somber tone:

"Speaking of which… I think we should try to figure out where we are. And, more importantly, why we are here. I think that if we pull all the information we have together, we might be able to find out a few things."

She nodded.

"Okay. I was thinking the same thing. There have to be hints in the descriptions of some of the Memories we received during the Chain of Nightmares. I can tell you which ones of mine seem important."

Sunny too thought that this was the best course of action, at least for now — the azure serpent didn't seem to have plans of climbing onto the carcass of the black turtle, and the current was pulling it downstream. Even if they tried to fly away, their speed wouldn't be much greater than that of the dark island.

So, they might as well try to better understand the situation first.

However…

He gathered his willpower, hesitated for a few moments, and forced out an indifferent smile:

"Uh… before that… I think you should summon a new armor Memory. So, you know… this one could restore itself."

Nephis frowned, then looked down at herself.

The black garments she wore were singed and torn, revealing more than a fair bit of her smooth alabaster skin. She remained motionless for a bit, then shifted slightly.

"Turn ar… can you turn around?"

She phrased it as a question instead of a request, but Sunny nevertheless obediently faced the wall of the fissure.

"I can."

After a moment of awkward silence, another question followed:

"...Can you also make your shadow turn around?"

He forced the gloomy shadow to face the black rock, too.

"No problem."

The Sin of Solace rolled his eyes, then shook his head and followed their example.

"You are a pitiful man, Sunny. You know that? Ah, don't bother responding… gods, I wish you did squish me with a hammer. Then, I

wouldn't have to endure your…"

Sunny ignored him.

Soon, the dark fissure became a little brighter — Neph's clothes turned into a swarm of white sparks.

Then, the fissure was illuminated again as she summoned another armor.

Sunny let out a shaky breath.

'What is this sense of déjà vu…'

"Are you done?"

She answered after a short pause:

"Yeah."

He smiled.

"Alright. Let's do some research, then!"

Chapter-1246: Research Partners

Nephis changed from her torn clothes, and was now wearing a white tunic with its hems embroidered in intricate red patterns. The tunic was somewhat similar to Sunny's Shroud of Dusk, but also different — it seemed like a single sheet of light fabric that had been elaborately tied at the shoulders, and thus had no sleeves.

Loosely fastened at the waist and with high slits, it seemed like something that could afford one a high degree of freedom of movement.

Still, Sunny was slightly surprised to see what Neph had chosen to summon.

She gave him a strange look.

"What?"

He shrugged.

"I just imagined that you would select a suit of steel armor, or at least something that offers more protection. There has to be a Memory like that among those that Summer Knight gave you, right?"

Nephis shook her head.

"There is. But what does it matter here? No matter how powerful of an armor Memory I use, it will still break after brushing against a great abomination once. So, I might as well go for something light and offering good utility. This tunic might not protect me well, but it enhances my senses. For now, that is more important.

Best of all…"

She slightly pursed her lips and added with a hint of frustration in her voice:

"...It won't burn."

Sunny suppressed a chuckle.

"Alright. Suit yourself."

It was not like he had anything to complain about. That tunic of hers was rather beautiful… plus, he wasn't one to talk, considering what he himself was wearing.

Sunny pulled his gaze away from Neph's slender figure and stared at the Memories that were laying on the ground between them. These were all the ones in their possession that mentioned Ariel, his Tomb, the Great River, or an estuary of any kind.

There was no real need to summon them, since both Sunny and Nephis could see each other's runes. However, having something to look at was more convenient.

They were:

A beautifully engraved chalice of white stone full of black liquid, a hand mirror of dark silver that gave off an ominous feeling, a graceful jian with a long and slender blade of pristine white jade, a necklace of engraved black metal that resembled a collar, an elegant mallet with a hammerhead made of perfectly black stone, and a dagger made of cloudy steel with a handle that was wrapped in black leather.

The Bitter Cusp, the Mirror of Truth, the Sin of Solace, the Stifled Scream, the Dark Shaper, and the Falling Ash.

The last two came from Nephis, while all the other ones came from Sunny — he had spent more time in Antarctica, after all, and received more Memories from the abominations of the Chain of Nightmares.

There was also the Shroud of Graceless Dusk, but Sunny did not feel like undressing… although it might have been only fair for him to do

so.

'Nevermind.'

He studied the Memories for a while, sometimes glancing at the shimmering runes in front of him. Eventually, Sunny said:

"Before we try to draw any conclusions, let's go over what we already know first."

Nephis nodded.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"First of all… there was a daemon called Ariel, the Demon of Dread. The Tomb of Ariel stands somewhere in the Nightmare Desert — however, it is not a tomb where Ariel is buried. Rather, it is a tomb that he built."

He remained silent for a moment, then continued:

"The seven of us entered a Seed of Nightmare that seemed to have originated from the Tomb of Ariel. However, instead of being transported into the past of the Nightmare Desert, we somehow ended up in the middle of a strange and boundless river."

It was not certain that the Great River was boundless — Sunny had not tried to reach its seemingly unattainable shores yet, after all. However, it was definitely incredibly vast.

He frowned.

"That river seems to be the Great River, which is said to exist outside of time and flow endlessly from the future into the past… whatever that means. The Great River is connected to the Tomb of Ariel, somehow. But we don't know how exactly."

After finishing, Sunny lingered a bit, and then asked:

"Anything you want to add?"

Nephis nodded.

"The Nightmare we entered is an abnormal one. The vision of the reversed time was interrupted. Additionally, there are supposed to be millions of challengers within it. Apart from that…"

She glanced at the strange sky of the Great River, where dawn coexisted with dusk and day, and at the seven suns bathing the world in light. Then, Nephis said:

"This place looks like a colossal Soul Sea."

Sunny's eyes glistened.

"Right? That was what I thought, as well!"

He sighed, and then picked up the dagger forged out of cloudy steel — the Falling Ash.

Weighing it in his hand, Sunny glanced at its complicated weave, and then turned to the runes.

Memory: [Falling Ash].

Memory Rank…

At the same time, Nephis looked at his own Memories for a while, and then tentatively picked up the Mirror of Truth. She glanced at her reflection, shivered, then turned the mirror around and studied the beautiful engravings on its back.

Her eyes darted from side to side, most likely reading the runes that described the meeting between Weaver and Ariel.

After a few moments, a contemplative expression appeared on Neph's face.

"This one is interesting. I think it is important… it can help us understand the nature and purpose of the Tomb of Ariel. However, it doesn't tell us anything about the Great River."

She put the Mirror of Truth aside and reached out for the Bitter Cusp.

"This one is connected to the Sin of Solace and the Falling Ash, I

think."

Sunny nodded as he read the description of the ashen dagger.

The runes read:

[Ariel built a beautiful palace of jade for the queen, and there, she held her court. A great bridge of stone led to the Jade Palace, covered in snow and ash. Soon, the news of the queen's beauty and wisdom spread across the realms, and many guests came to witness her grace. Not all of them survived the snow, and even fewer survived the ash. Still, more and more came.]

He frowned.

The description of the Sin of Solace told of a beautiful monster that Ariel had made a queen and gifted with the sinister knowledge of hideous truth. The description of the Bitter Cusp told the eerie story of a group of guests that came to the Jade Court with ill intentions. And this one told about how Ariel had built the Jade Court… the Jade Palace… for the Jade Queen.

None of that information was particularly useful for them now, except maybe for the fact that Ariel seemed fond of building things.

However…

Sunny glanced at Nephis and showed her the dagger.

"That Jade Palace… doesn't it sound like Ravenheart?"

Ravenheart, the Great Citadel of Clan Song, was situated among snowy peaks and raging volcanoes. Snow and ash were always falling there… and, more than that, one had to cross an enormous stone bridge to reach it.

The description of the Jade Palace was too similar.

Neph looked at the Falling Ash. Then, her eyes glinted a little.

"...It does."

Sunny was a bit stunned. He had learned some time ago that the Citadels of the great clans were left behind by the seven daemons, and were thus very important to the Sovereigns. So were the Ivory Tower, which had once belonged to Hope, and the Hollow Mountains, where Nether's Citadel still remained undiscovered. That was why Valor and Song had been racing to conquer the Tomb of Ariel.

But… if the Citadel left behind by Ariel was actually Ravenheart…

Then which daemon was tied to the black pyramid? Who could be more connected to the Tomb of Ariel than its builder?

Feeling confused, Sunny shook his head and tried to concentrate on the task at hand.

Right now, they had to learn about the Great River the most… because that was where they were stuck…

Putting the Falling Ash back, he picked up the Dark Shaper — which looked like an elegant mallet with its head made of perfectly black stone.

In fact… that black stone looked very familiar.

Sunny studied the weave of the black mallet, then glanced at its runes.

A few moments later, his eyes widened.

Chapter-1247: Fear Itself

The Dark Shaper was a Transcendent Memory of the Fourth Tier that Nephis had gained in Antarctica. It was one of the few she had chosen to keep — the rest either went to the Fire Keepers or were sold to acquire various equipment and resources.

Being the leader of a group of elite Awakened was not cheap. Even with the support of Clan Valor, Neph had to work hard to provide her followers with the best... everything. Perhaps it was a part of the King of Swords testing her competency, or perhaps the great clan simply didn't care to spend too much on the survivors of the Forgotten Shore before they proved themselves.

In any case, Nephis had decided to keep the Dark Shaper for herself.

The reason she had decided to hold on to the stone mallet was both because of its power and because its description mentioned the Demon of Dread.

The Dark Shaper looked more like a tool than a weapon. It had a handle of dark polished wood inlaid with dull silver. The hammerhead was fashioned out of perfectly black stone — which looked and felt rather familiar.

Sunny was almost certain that it was the same stone that the Tomb of Ariel had been built of.

The stone mallet's enchantments had to do with sculpting and changing the shape of things. Disturbingly, these things were not limited to stone, metal, and wood… if one wished, they could also shape flesh and bone, sculpting all kinds of nightmarish creations. The sinister Corrupted Devil Nephis had killed to receive the Dark Shaper was similarly revolting.

It was indeed a Memory worthy of being graced with the name of the

Demon of Dread in its description.

And speaking of the description…

At first, Sunny simply studied the shimmering runes, finding them rather interesting.

They read:

Memory: [Dark Shaper].

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: IV.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [When the unholy titan took a step, everyone cowered in fear. Only Ariel, the Demon of Dread, remained standing — he did not feel fear, for he was fear itself. Taking a step forward, he challenged the unholy titan, and the two battled under the azure sky. Their battle was fierce, their battle was fearsome. Their battle was a hint of the doom that would come.

The unholy titan possessed an indestructible stone body and was invulnerable to all harm. As they fought, the land was shattered and the sky split apart. The Demon of Dread received many harrowing wounds, but the terrible titan remained wholly unscathed. Its stone body became incandescent from the heat, shining brighter than the fiery sun.

That was when the Demon of Dread whispered something to his enemy, and then cast the titan into the depths of the ocean.

When the incandescent titan plunged into the cool water, the ocean turned into searing vapor and was scattered by the winds. The stone flesh of the titan instantly cooled, causing a tiny crack to appear on its heart — that tiny spot was the only part of the creature that had not been tempered, and was also its only flaw.

As Ariel watched coldly, the titan bellowed in agony. After one heartbeat, cracks appeared on its indestructible body. After two

heartbeats, blood flowed from its wounds like a river. After three heartbeats, its body started to crumble into numerous shards.

And on the seventh heartbeat, its heart shattered, turning into dust.

That was how the unholy stone titan was destroyed.

Following the end of the battle, the Demon of Dread created a mystical river out of the titan's blood, and built a pyramid out of its stone flesh. The pyramid stood where the ocean had once been, and…]

The description ended.

It was after he finished reading that Sunny's eyes widened as an unbelievable guess appeared in his mind.

'Wait. No. No way…'

The tale of Ariel's battle with an Unholy Titan was indeed very interesting, not the least because it seemed as though the Demon of Dread had won due to a single whisper. More than that, it hinted at the answers to several questions that Sunny had been curious about. For example, who or what was the progenitor of the Minor Shard of the Stone Titan — Goliath.

Or how the Nightmare Desert had come into existence…

But these precious pieces of knowledge were not what caused such a reaction from Sunny. What drew his attention was the abrupt end of the description.

Didn't it seem… incomplete?

As if there was another part of it missing.

…Coincidentally, he knew of another description that seemed like a fragment of a larger whole.

Frowning, Sunny summoned his own runes and found the name of the Stifled Scream. Concentrating on it, he read:

Memory Description: [...a great river was contained within it, flowing endlessly from the future into the past. When doom came, many entered to seek shelter from it, and many had come to seek the truth. That was because the Great River existed outside time, and so, it was said that a dreadful secret was hidden at its estuary.

Few of those capable dared to approach it, and none of those who had returned.]

He remained motionless for a few moments, then mentally put the two descriptions together.

'Following the end of the battle, the Demon of Dread created a mystical river out of the titan's blood, and built a pyramid out of its stone flesh. The pyramid stood where the ocean had once been, and… a great river was contained within it… flowing endlessly from the future into the past?'

His hands trembled.

Unable to speak, Sunny turned his head slightly and stared at Nephis.

A few moments later, she noticed his gaze and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

He lingered for a while, and then said hesitantly:

"That… I am really not sure… but I think I understand where we are now."

Then, Sunny looked at the narrow strip of the sky above them and added in a hushed voice:

"Neph, this might sound crazy... but I think that we are inside the black pyramid..."

Chapter-1248: Entombed

The two of them climbed from the fissure and were staring at the seven suns moving across the vast sky. They remained silent for a while.

Eventually, Sunny spoke:

"I know that it doesn't make sense… but it also makes so much sense, you know?"

Nephis frowned, but did not retort. She had read both descriptions, as well… although Sunny's theory sounded outlandish, it was also compelling, in a bizarre and irrational kind of way.

He took a deep breath.

"I mean, listen… we were in the Nightmare Desert, and entered the Third Nightmare through a Seed that had been a part of Ariel's Tomb once. Logically, the Spell should have sent us into the past of the desert, or at least into the past of the black pyramid. However, it sent us into the Great River instead. That is an obvious contradiction."

Sunny swept his hair back and rubbed his eyes.

"But it all makes sense if the Great River is actually situated inside the pyramid. Sure, no matter how large the pyramid is, it can't be large enough to contain an entire region of the Dream Realm… an entire world, even. That is if we think about it from the perspective of human logic. However, Ariel was not a human. He was a daemon — an actual deity. Beings like that are not bound by mundane logic.

If he could create a pyramid that does not draw nearer no matter how long you walk toward it, who says that he couldn't create a pyramid that contains a whole world inside it?"

Nephis studied the seven radiant suns, then glanced at the vast expanse of the Great River.

The azure serpent raised its head from the water, staring at them with madness and hunger.

Struggling to ignore it, she sighed.

"Did he create that world too, then? Well… now that I think about it, he might have. Both of us thought that this place looked like a Soul Sea, right? Maybe it is not a Soul Sea, but instead was made from one. Ariel built the black pyramid out of the flesh of an Unholy Titan. He created the Great River out of its blood.

Then, he created a world out of its soul? If so… then those seven suns were made out of seven divine soul shards that the Titan had left behind."

Nephis lingered for a bit, and then added:

"If the humans of the Forgotten Shore could create an artificial sun, there's really no reason why Ariel couldn't create seven better ones."

Sunny nodded.

"It would also explain why there are no stars in the night sky, and why it's entirely black. Because it is not a real sky… instead, the black pyramid is hollow, and what we're looking at is actually the inner side of its walls."

The two of them looked at each other, both growing more and more convinced that this startling theory was right.

Troubled, Nephis looked at the seven suns again.

"So, Ariel created this place… this tomb… to bury the truths he couldn't endure. And there is said to be a dreadful secret hidden in its estuary. It is easy to conclude that the truth he buried and the dreadful secret are one and the same.

However… isn't it a little bit too elaborate of a feat, to create a whole world, hide it within an indestructible pyramid, and remove it from

the natural flow of time — all just to hide a secret? Why would he want to go to all that trouble?"

Sunny listened to her with a somber expression on his face.

He remained silent for a bit, then said:

"Maybe it's not that he wanted to, but instead that he had no other choice. The truth is hidden in the estuary of the Great River, and the Great River flows from the future into the past. But… what is its estuary, actually? What can be the end of a river that flows through time, into the past?"

He shifted slightly.

"The only end such a river can have is the point… when time didn't exist yet. Isn't it? Where the past terminates. The estuary of the Great River has to be the point where the past disappears into the primordial void, which was everlasting and everchanging, and existed before the concepts like death and time were even created. By the gods. In fact, the estuary has to exist before the gods were born.

And, therefore… outside their control. If Ariel wanted to hide something from even the gods, wouldn't he have had to go to such lengths?"

Nephis sighed, then rubbed her face.

"This is… a little bit too strange to think about. A time before time existed? That is a paradox in and of itself, don't you think? Also, the Great River does not only flow from the future into the past, it also does so endlessly. How can an endless river reach a point of termination?"

Sunny felt a headache coming. He grimaced and looked away.

"...Well, anyway. Regardless of all that. At least we know now that the sybils did not literally hide inside a huge pyramid with their people. They actually came to the Great River, which existed outside the natural flow of time, and was thus far removed from the doom that they were escaping. That doom… it had to be the war between the daemons and the gods, right?

That was why they eventually couldn't hear the voices of the gods anymore. Because the gods died."

Nephis slowly nodded, prompting Sunny to smile.

"You do understand what it means, don't you?"

She looked at him with a hint of confusion.

"What exactly are you talking about?"

He grinned.

"It means that there are tons of locals here on the Great River. We just haven't found them yet… but when we do, we'll be able to learn all kinds of information from them, including what the central conflict of this Nightmare is, and how to conquer it."

She tilted her head a little.

"Right… there have to be plenty of humans here, according to the descriptions of the Memories. It's just that they had entered the Great River much, much earlier than we did. So, they are probably somewhere further downstream… further into the past."

Without having to say anything, both of them turned to look north, in the direction where the waters of the Great River were flowing.

The view was rather beautiful, except for the terrifying silhouette of the ancient serpent, which had raised its neck from the water and was devouring them with its eyes.

Nephis lingered for a while, and then said in a low voice:

"But, Sunny… what if the goal of this Nightmare is to reach the Estuary? What are we going to do then?"

He shivered, startled by her question.

Reach the end of the Great River… surely, a Third Nightmare would not have an insane goal like that. That was not a task mere Ascended were qualified to complete.

There had to be something else… something palpable and attainable, something that they could accomplish.

He just didn't know what it was.

Sunny let out a stifled laugh.

"Let's hope that it's not. And if it is… well. I guess we'll have to do our best."

The Sin of Solace smirked as he looked at the water.

Chapter-1249: Titanic Ship

'So… this is it, then.'

The Tomb of Ariel had been built from the remains of the Stone Titan, while the Great River created from its blood was contained within it, illuminated by the seven suns made from its broken soul cores.

The secret hidden at the Estuary was the truth that Ariel had wished to forget. The Nightmare Desert was the result of the battle between him and the unholy creature.

Looking at the blue sky above them, Sunny couldn't help but wonder…

'So the daemons were capable of creating artificial worlds?'

Then, a sudden thought made him shiver.

'What is the difference between a real world and an artificial one, though?'

Was there even a difference? And if there was not… had the rest of the worlds been created by someone, as well? The daemons? The gods?

The unknown?

He sighed, then shook his head.

'Do I really have time to ponder the cosmic origins of the world?'

Right now, they had more practical questions to answer. Many of the mysteries of the Third Nightmare had been revealed to them, but many more remained. At least they now knew where they were, and what their next step had to be.

Travel downstream, find the sybils, and learn how to conquer this Seed.

'Well… that is easier said than done, though.'

Sunny stared at the waters of the Great River and saw the sharp blades of the azure serpent's dorsal fin break its surface as the great abomination hungrily circled the corpse of the titanic turtle.

A dark expression appeared on his face.

After a bit of silence, he said:

"Neph… do you think we can kill this thing?"

She smiled faintly. Sunny had expected to hear some kind of a crazy answer, like always, but she unexpectedly gave him a sober one instead.

"It is… not impossible. This Beast is two whole Ranks above us, which would usually mean that there is no hope. But then again, we did eventually kill a few Fallen abominations as Sleepers, back on the Forgotten Shore."

Nephis grew silent for a moment, and then added somberly:

"However, the gap between Ranks grows much wider the higher those Ranks are. The difference between a Corrupted creature and a Fallen one is much greater than the difference between a Fallen creature and an Awakened one… while the gap between a Great abomination and a Corrupted one is even greater still. Worse yet, this Great Beast is in its natural element in the water, while we are not.

My Aspect will also be weakened there, in the depths."

Glaring at the serpent intensely, Sunny slowly nodded. Everything she said was reasonable.

"...I bet I can still kill it, though."

Hearing his unexpected words, Nephis chuckled.

But Sunny was serious. He was not particularly confident, but he also did not think that their chances were close to zero. Both of them were strong, and they were even stronger together. There were his Shadows, and the powerful Memories they possessed. Most importantly, the azure serpent was a mere Beast… no matter how harrowing its power was, it lacked intelligence.

While Sunny was full of all kinds of devious schemes, with Nephis trailing not far behind.

The odds were perilous, but not impossible indeed.

Neph sighed.

"Maybe… but maybe we won't need to gamble with our lives. There might not be a need to fight it at all."

He lingered for a while, then nodded.

She was right. Their current goal was to travel downstream, far into the past, and find those humans who had escaped the war between the gods and the daemons by entering the Tomb of Ariel.

The corpse of the Great Monster they were using as shelter, meanwhile, was being slowly dragged in that same direction by the current.

The titanic carcass of the Black Turtle was like a ship that could very well take them all the way to their destination. Since that was the case, there was no reason to battle the azure serpent, or anything at all.

Of course, things could change for the worse at any moment. The future was unclear, and there was no way to tell what would happen.

'No… wait… since we are moving downstream, wouldn't it be the past that is unclear? Ah… my head hurts…'

Sunny sighed and glanced at Nephis:

"What do we do, then? What is our next move?"

She looked up. The seven suns were already starting to drown in the radiant waters of the Great River, and the dawn of the eastern horizon was slowly fading into the pitch blackness of the night.

Nephis lowered her gaze.

"...It's late. We should probably rest and take another look at the situation in the morning, with fresh eyes. I don't know about you, but I am thoroughly exhausted. I haven't slept in a long while, and the battle between the turtle and the snake took a lot out of me."

Sunny smiled crookedly.

He was tired, too… he had not done anything in the last couple of days except drift through the sky, but as it turned out, doing nothing was very exhausting. Especially when one was suspended between the surface of a mystical river and the sky, having to keep an eye on both lest some terrible creature swallow them whole in one bite.

"Yeah. I'm tired too."

Some time later, the two of them were hidden from the wind and the piercing gaze of the ancient serpent in the familiar fissure on the shell of the dead behemoth. There was a small fire burning between them, casting shadows on the black rock.

The shadows were dancing.

There were not a lot of things on the dark island that could be used as fuel, but Sunny had a few bricks of compressed synthetic firewood stored in the Covetous Coffer. Once again, his loyal alloy chest had come in handy… sadly, it was already almost empty.

Nephis made a dish from some of Sunny's last provisions, and the two of them enjoyed a late supper as the world was slowly consumed by darkness. The soft glow of the water was not visible from inside the fissure, and it seemed as though nothing at all existed outside the small circle illuminated by the fire anymore.

There were no stars in the black sky, and so…

Sunny couldn't help but remember a similar night from many years

ago, when Nephis and he had first met on the Forgotten Shore and shared a conversation in the dark.

Gods... almost four years had passed since then, hadn't they?

A small smile appeared on his face.

"Hey… do you remember how you told me about the adventures of Odysseus?"

Nephis looked up from her food and hesitated for a moment. A distant expression appeared on her beautiful face.

"Sure. Why?"

Sunny shook his head and shoved a spoonful of the fragrant, thick soup into his mouth.

"No, nothing. That Odysseus guy… I don't think he had gone through half the crap we had to go through, though…"

Chapter-1250: Death of a Hero

A faint smile appeared on Neph's face. She stared into the fire for a while, then leaned her back against the weathered black rock with a shrug.

"Who can tell? There are a lot of stories about the trials and tribulations he had to endure."

Bathed in the warmth of the fire and with his belly pleasantly full, Sunny felt his body and mind relax. Throwing a curious glance at her, he asked:

"What is your favorite story about that guy, then?"

Nephis remained silent for a while with a look of contemplation on her face, which was cast in shadows, with only its vague silhouette visible in the darkness… and the dancing white sparks that shone in the depths of her eyes.

Eventually, she said:

"Maybe it's not a favorite… but I often think about one of them, in particular."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Which one?"

Neph sighed quietly before answering:

"Odysseus was a great hero of Hellas, but he was not the greatest one. The greatest and most powerful hero was named Heracles, who was a demigod and a slayer of monsters. Heracles possessed incredible strength and performed many incredible feats… after he died, the gods took his soul to the heavenly realm, where he became an

immortal god himself."

She grew quiet for a moment.

"However, Odysseus once descended into the underworld, where he saw the shadows of the dead. Among them was the forlorn shadow of Heracles… so, when I was a child, I always wondered how Heracles could both be a god and a lost shadow in the land of the dead."

Nephis shifted slightly and moved her hand, causing the fire to suddenly burn brighter.

"I asked my grandmother, and she explained that one part of Heracles was divine, while another part of him was human. It was the divine part of Heracles that ascended to godhood, while the human part was cast down into the underworld, doomed to wander its dark halls forever."

Her voice was a little wistful.

Sunny frowned and gave her a dark look.

"That's… a little messed up."

Neph smiled.

"Right? I also always thought that it was very unfair, for the gods to simply discard the human part of Heracles. Hypocritical, even."

She lingered for a few moments and shrugged.

"Of course, when I grew older, I realized that it was really just two different versions of the myth colliding with each other. The stories of Odysseus are older, and so Heracles, despite being the greatest of heroes, had a tragic death in those ancient myths.

The version of his own stories that we know are newer, and the original ending was changed to a happier one at some point, with the added lesson… be a valiant hero, and you shall be rewarded. Something like that."

When she finished talking, Sunny suddenly chuckled. His eye glinted

in the dark.

"So little Neph thought that the gods were hypocrites, huh? I see now… turns out, your disdain for the figures of authority goes very far back."

A corner of her mouth twisted up.

"...I guess it does."

'No wonder she is dead set on killing the Sovereigns and destroying the Spell... this hopeless lunatic was like that from the very start...'

Sunny hesitated for a while, then asked:

"Don't you think that it is a little hypocritical too, though? You are a great figure of authority yourself now, after all. Lady Changing Star of the Immortal Flame, the torchbearer of humanity and the idol of millions of people, both mundane and Awakened. Seems like a contradiction."

Nephis looked at him across the fire with a neutral expression. The sparks of white light in her eyes danced as she answered:

"Humans are contradictory creatures. They can wage genocidal wars in the name of pacifist religions, tell truths to deceive each other. They can even love and hate something… or someone… at the same time."

Looking away, she shrugged and smiled.

"I was a very reasonable child, and I often tried to understand people through reason — to no success whatsoever, of course. It was only after I learned that people are inherently unreasonable that I started to understand them a little. Oh… I am a person too. It's no surprise that I am a bit contradictory as well."

Sunny stared at her silently. After a while, he scoffed:

"Really? Because, let me tell you… I was a very unreasonable child."

Nephis looked at him in surprise.

"Seriously?"

He nodded energetically.

"Oh, yes. One might even say that I was a bit dumb. Trying to understand things through reason? Couldn't be me… I just learned things through trial and error."

Sunny paused for a moment, and then added somberly:

"Well... mostly error…"

Nephis tilted her head a little, and then suddenly smiled.

"To be honest, I can't really imagine you as a child. I just always imagine you as... you. What were you like?"

He scratched the back of his head with a bit of embarrassment.

"Well… if I remember correctly, I was very gentle and kind. To a fault, even. Do you know how kids would sometimes pull the wings off annoying insects? I would never… in fact, I would cry for a day straight if I accidentally killed a spider or a fly."

His face slowly turned grim.

"Oh, well… that didn't last long, though. So I was mostly a weird and wicked child, I guess. Still, it was better than being soft and naive."

Then, Sunny looked at Nephis in confusion.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

She blinked a couple of times.

"Pulling the wings off insects? What? Is it really a thing children do?"

He coughed.

'Right… I forgot that Neph grew up incredibly sheltered, because of all the assassination attempts. Had she even met someone her age before coming to the Academy?'

Sunny awkwardly looked away.

"Oh… maybe it's just a boy thing. Or an outskirts thing? I don't know, really… not everyone does it. But some kids do. Well, I have no idea… I didn't…"

Neph remained silent for a while, then said thoughtfully:

"Maybe they are playing Awakened and pretending to slay Nightmare Creatures. Yes, that makes sense. Still… it's a bit cruel…"

The conversation had taken a strange turn, and Sunny was feeling a little uncomfortable. The fire was dying down, too.

He cleared his throat.

"Well, anyway. I think it's time we went to bed. I mean, we don't have a bed… beds, I mean beds! So it's time we go… to sleeping bags? Damn it… what I'm trying to say is that you should sleep first. I'll take the first watch, and wake you up later.

Alright?"

Neph watched him fumble his words with a strange expression, and then nodded silently.

'What the hell was that… what was I even saying…'

Soon, the fire died, and Sunny was left alone.

Neph was asleep, and he could hear the soft sound of her breathing not too far away. After hesitating for a bit, Sunny summoned Nightmare and ordered him to guard her sleep.

At that moment, the Sin of Solace suddenly said:

"Wow, Sunny. You really have a way with words, huh? A real charmer… I wouldn't say that torturing insects is a very romantic topic of conversation, but other than that…"

Sunny ground his teeth, refusing to look at the pale apparition.

He knew exactly what the bastard looked like, anyway.

'...Shut up!'

Chapter-1251: Rude Awakening

With Nightmare guarding Sunny's dreams, his sleep was deep and peaceful.

…His awakening, however, was not.

'Wh… what?!'

Sunny woke from feeling the world tilt, and then quake with a violent shudder. He was thrown sideways and collided with the slope of the fissure, feeling the sharp rocks cutting into his skin. Groggy and disoriented, he tried to stand up, but got tangled in the sleeping bag instead.

'Damn it!'

The sleeping bag disintegrated as he tore through it, already summoning the Sin of Solace and the Moonlight Shard.

The world lurched once again, and the deafening roar of water reached his ear.

'What is going on?'

Assessing his surroundings through shadow sense, Sunny did not notice immediate danger. He did, however, notice Nephis — she had climbed out of the fissure and was now standing on its edge, her white tunic and silver hair fluttering in the wind.

Sunny could not see her face, but judging by the lack of weapons in her hands, the situation was not critical.

He let out a relieved sigh, then glanced at the destroyed sleeping bag with regret. Just a moment later, the dark island shuddered again, and a strange tremor ran through the black turtle's stone shell.

At that moment, an obnoxious voice resounded from his left:

"Good morning. Rise and shine!"

Throwing a contemptuous glance at the spirit of the Sin of Solace, Sunny grimaced and pushed himself off the ground. Soaring high into the air, he kicked the slope of the fissure and propelled himself even higher, landing noiselessly near Nephis a moment later.

The seven suns were already rising, and the world was suffused with the golden radiance of dawn.

"What is happening?"

Instead of answering, she pointed her finger at a particular spot off the edge of the island. There, the water was turbulent and foamy, rising in violent waves. The river had washed away most of the blood during the night, but now, it was painted red once again. In fact, the red color was more vivid and intense than ever.

Sunny frowned. The next moment, something large and swift moved beneath the surface of the red water, and the carcass of the Black Turtle quaked again.

'What the…'

As more blood poured into the Great River, there was a strange sound. Soon, the azure serpent's giant head rose from the turbulent water and stared at them with its vicious, cloudy eyes. Streams of red were flowing from its impenetrable scales.

This time, however, there was something different about the great beast — clenched tightly in its harrowing jaws was a huge chunk of red, bleeding meat. Still staring at them with malice, the creature moved its jaw and started chewing it.

Needless to say, the sight was more than a little disturbing.

Standing by Sunny's side, Nephis said:

"It's eating the turtle."

He glanced at her with a strange expression.

"Yeah. I've noticed."

With that, both of them fell silent as they watched the serpent.

...Who was watching them while devouring the meat of the slain Great Monster.

Yesterday, Sunny had struggled with chewing through the tough meat of the Black Turtle, but it was almost melting in the abomination's enormous maw. The jade fangs were painted red as they effortlessly sliced through the bleeding chunk, which was diminishing at an alarming rate.

He couldn't help but shudder when imagining what these fangs would do to his own flesh… no Armor Memory he possessed and no Attribute augmenting his body stood a chance of resisting the fangs of the Great Beast even for a split second. If those jaws closed on Sunny, he would be obliterated in an instant.

Sunny stared at the feasting serpent.

Then, suddenly, a long sigh escaped from his lips.

"You know what? I'm... really damn tired of this."

Nephis looked at him with a silent question.

"Tired of what?"

Sunny vaguely pointed with his hand.

"It's just… nothing ever goes as it is supposed to, does it? I remember surrendering myself to the cops when I became infected. They told me this and that about how the process of Awakening is supposed to happen. And, I swear to the dead gods… not a single thing they told me to expect ended up coming true."

A darkly exasperated expression appeared on his face.

"My First Nightmare? An Awakened Tyrant appears. The solstice?

There's a Fallen Terror blocking the only way out. The Second Nightmare? Here is a couple of immortal Saints I need to kill… oh, and they are completely out of their minds.

Really, I went through so many absolutely unreasonable things as an Aspirant, Sleeper, and Awakened."

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"I am a Master now, and instead of fighting Fallen Nightmare Creatures like Masters are supposed to do, there's this Great Beast staring me down. Let's not even mention all the Corrupted abominations I've already killed. Is this what they call suffering from success? If so, I really don't want to be such an overachiever anymore… can't something normal happen, for once?"

Listening to him, Nephis tilted her head a little.

She remaine silent for a bit, and then said:

"...You're right. You really had to overcome completely unreasonable things as an Aspirant, Sleeper, Awakened, and Master."

Then, a hint of a smile appeared on her lips, and sparks of white light ignited in her eyes.

"But, Sunny… considering all that, have you thought about… what kind of things you'll have to face as a Saint?"

Sunny's already pale face suddenly became even whiter. A hint of horror appeared in his eyes.

"Oh, gods…"

He shivered.

"You evil… no, no, I don't want to even think about it!"

Smiling, Nephis looked away and concentrated on the azure serpent once again. After a few moments of silence, she said:

"Maybe you should consider this as training, then. In any case… what

do you think we should do now?"

Sunny threw a gloomy glance her way and shrugged.

"I'm not sure. The turtle is huge, so even this old snake won't be able to hollow its shell out quickly. I don't think it can overturn the carcass or break through the carapace at this point… but I'm not sure. We should be ready for anything, I guess."

Nephis lingered for a while, and then nodded.

"I agree. Let's wait and see, then."

As the enormous carcass of the Great Monster shuddered once again, they stood side by side and watched silently as the water was slowly saturated with crimson blood.

Chapter-1252: Voyage, Voyage

At first, Sunny and Nephis were tense and fully focused, observing the feasting serpent with grim apprehension and a bit of dread.

But then, slowly…

It got a little boring.

Even though very few people had ever gotten a chance to see a Great Beast devour a Great Monster — or maybe none at all — as it turned out, even such a macabre and awesome spectacle could grow old really fast.

The Black Turtle was just too enormous. Even though the azure serpent was gigantic itself, it still couldn't devour a significant portion of its carcass in a short amount of time, no matter how hard it tried. It would probably take the creature days, or even weeks, to put a dent in the floating corpse of the titanic monster.

Eventually, Sunny and Nephis found themselves sitting side by side on the green moss, looking silently at the Great River.

The two of them made for a striking contrast. Sunny was wearing a tunic of black silk embroidered with silver thread, his hair black as a raven's wing. Nephis was wearing a tunic, too, hers perfectly white and decorated with red accents. Her long silver hair was moving slightly in the wind.

One's eyes were like two pools of unfathomable darkness, the other's were grey, calm, and hid within them a boundless, immolating heat.

Both would have seemed too flawless and beautiful to a mundane human, with perfectly smooth alabaster skin and faces that seemed to have been chiseled from precious stone by a divine sculptor.

Surrounded by the vast expanse of a mystical river and sitting calmly atop the shell of a great monster, wearing no armor and holding no weapons in their hands, they looked like two transient deities that had descended from the heavenly realm to rest on the soft moss and enjoy the breathtaking beauty of this strange world.

…Of course, Sunny had none of these thoughts. Instead, he had an entirely different view of the current situation.

'This is… huh…'

Over the years, he had grown accustomed to being in the company of armor-clad Awakened, heavily armed soldiers, and military vehicles. Looking at the slender silhouette of Neph's body outlined by the light fabric of her tunic, and the weightless silk of his own Graceless Dusk, he couldn't help but feel a sense of strange incongruity.

They were currently in the most dire predicament of their habitually dire lives. And yet…

'What the hell. We look like we're enjoying a luxury cruise…'

Of course, leisure cruises and getaways on tropical islands had not been a thing since before the Dark Times. Sunny just found the idea amusing after randomly learning about that ancient tradition from Rain, and was reminded of that conversation right now. He knew that being surrounded by great abominations was not exactly one's idea of a relaxing vacation.

However.

The corpse of the Black Turtle was technically floating, so it was like a ship. At the same time, it was large enough to be an island. The food was delicious. The view was to die for.

The company was very nice, too…

If not for the blooded snout of the azure serpent rising above the water from time to time, he would have actually been… quite content.

'Huh?'

Sensing his strange mood, Nephis looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"You… have that funny look in your eyes…"

Sunny coughed.

"Uh, I was just thinking that this entire situation is weirdly… peaceful? We are on top of a dead Great Monster and there is Great Beast slowly devouring that monster as it waits for a chance to munch on our souls, and yet… there's nothing to do?"

He scratched his head.

"Let me tell you, the start of my Second Nightmare was nowhere near as relaxing. Plus, this Black Turtle, it's kind of like a ship, isn't it? So… we're relaxing on a ship… I just think it's funny."

Nephis blinked a couple of times, then stared at the black expanse of the Black Turtle's shell.

After a short pause, she said awkwardly:

"Oh. You would know better. I… I actually was never on a real ship."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

'Oh... that's right. She was brought to Antarctica by Whispering Blade. She never sailed across the ocean on an alloy battleship, only flew through the sky aboard the Chain Breaker.'

He chuckled.

"Well, it's not that special. Mostly, you just stay inside and pray that the ship doesn't start splitting around you. Or that something from the outside doesn't come inside to pay you a visit. By the way… both of those things happened to me… so no matter how strange it feels to say, this feels much nicer."

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then looked away.

Her voice was even when she said:

"This is much nicer than the start of my Second Nightmare, too. Because I'm… not alone."

Sunny looked at her carefully.

A strange thought surfaced in his mind:

'Was she going to say… something else?'

He suddenly felt tense again.

A lot of very complicated emotions that Sunny had done his best to avoid for a long, long time reared their heads in his heart.

'Was she...'

Luckily — or unfortunately — the azure serpent chose that exact moment to let out a frenzied roar and dive back into the water, sending a huge fountain of it flying into the sky.

It seemed that the old snake had been satiated, for now.

Full of renewed vigor, the serpent started circling the Black Turtle once again, raising its head from time to time to stare at them with deranged eyes.

Sunny sighed.

"This snake just never gives up, does it?"

Nephis silently nodded and then stood up.

Illuminated by the light of the seven suns and outlined against the blue sky, her lithe figure was like a painting.

"But it really can't overturn the carcass or break the shell. We don't need to keep watching it for now."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"So then… what should we do?"

She thought for a while, then glanced at the soft carpet of green moss

and the mysterious landscape of the dark island.

Eventually, Nephis shrugged.

"...Whatever we want?"

Chapter-1253: Parade of Shadows

After resting for a while, Sunny and Nephis separated. She went off to study the Memories Sir Gilead had transferred to her — there had not been a lot of time to get a proper feel for them in the Nightmare Desert. Sunny, meanwhile, remained sitting on the soft moss with a contemplative expression.

'What to do…'

First, he closed his eyes and sent the five shadows to investigate the dark island. It was somewhere between one and two kilometers across, so there was not a lot of ground to cover. However, the terrain of the giant shell of black rock was weathered and uneven. There were plenty of cracks and fissures, some of them large and easy to notice, others hidden from view.

Some were entirely filled with water.

The exploration did not take too long. His shadows did not find anything really interesting, either — there was the weathered rock, the vibrant patches of green moss, and the remains of the creature's battle armor, its silver now tarnished and bleak. Other than that, the dark island was desolate and barren.

What made a deep impression on Sunny, though, were the fissures themselves. At first, he had assumed that they were just natural features of the Great Monster's stone shell… but after some time, with a shiver, he realized that they were not.

Instead, each of the deep grooves was a scar left on the titanic shell of the ancient creature by unknown enemies. None managed to penetrate it, and some were rather shallow — however, some were dark and frighteningly deep.

Considering that even the azure serpent was not able to crack the Black Turtle's carapace, Sunny dreaded to imagine what kind of creatures had left those claw marks on its back.

He looked at the gleaming expanse of the Great River with gloom. Suddenly, the enchanting beauty of this dreamlike world seemed like a facade that hid unspeakable horrors behind its alluring veil.

Of course, Sunny had known that already. But in that moment, he felt it stronger than ever before.

'Beautiful things are the most dangerous.'

Glancing in the direction where Nephis had left, he sighed and stretched his legs.

The shadows returned, and then, three figures rose from them.

Onyx Saint, Nightmare, and Ravenous Fiend.

He silently studied them for a while, thinking. Saint was stoic and indifferent, as always… if he did not know that she was alive, he would have assumed that the graceful and towering figure in front of him was a beautiful statue. Nightmare was staring at the azure serpent, which was circling the island, with dark and malevolent fury burning in his crimson eyes.

Imp seemed a little uncomfortable under Sunny's gaze, shifting from foot to foot nervously.

Nightmare was the weakest of the three, but also offered the most utility to Sunny. He didn't necessarily need to use the tenebrous stallion as a battle companion… that said, his steed was very close to unlocking the Terror Ability and finally realizing its full potential. The next Rank was also not far away.

Once Nightmare came into his power as a Terror and Ascended, his power would take a great leap.

Sunny had little means of speeding up that process at the moment, though. It was going to happen when it happened… probably before too long.

Saint, meanwhile, was already incredibly powerful. She was so powerful, in fact, that Sunny had no means of pushing her to greater power anymore. To make the graceful stone knight achieve the Supreme Rank, he would need three hundred Transcended Memories of the First Tier, or six hundred Ascended ones… or one thousand and two hundred Awakened ones.

Needless to say, these numbers were unattainable at the moment.

He didn't even want to count the potential number of Dormant Memories she would need to rank up. Reaching a higher Class, meanwhile, required luck and stumbling on a uniquely suitable enemy — it was outside his control. Saint had already classed up twice, but the rest of his Shadows, excluding the aberrant Soul Serpent, had yet to do it even once. That went to show how rare such opportunities were.

There was one thing Sunny could do right now, though…

Glancing at Saint, he sent Morgan's Warbow and the Stifled Scream her way.

The bow was self-explanatory — he was planning to make Saint the sentry for as long as they remained on the dark island. The Stifled Scream, however, was more tricky.

That charm of his had an enchantment called [Echoing Silence]. Its description read: "When wearing this charm, the physical power of its master is augmented... but only as long as they remain silent. The longer their silence lasts, uninterrupted, the greater the boon of power they'll receive."

This was a powerful enchantment indeed, and one perfectly suited for the taciturn Shadow. However, he had never managed to get a lot out of it, because there had never been an opportunity to keep Saint summoned for weeks on end.

Right now, however… there was an interesting idea in Sunny's head.

'The physical augmentation the Stifled Scream grows stronger the longer one stays silent. So, it functions in relation to time.'

Weren't they flowing through time, though? Sunny did not know how exactly the distance traveled on the Great River corresponded to time, but he assumed that it was not a small amount. Were they moving one day into the past each day? One month?

One year?

If so, then the augmentation of the Stifled Scream could potentially reach its theoretical limit in no time. That was an outlandish theory, but it was worth checking out, at least.

Satisfied, Sunny turned to Imp.

On paper, the scrawny goblin was on the same level of power as Saint — he was a Transcendent Devil, as well. But in reality, there was an insurmountable gap between them. Imp was just an adolescent as far as Shadows went, after all. He was still on the weaker side, inexperienced, and untrained.

His core physical Attribute, the [Lesser Steel Body], had just recently evolved to the [Greater Steel Body]. Sunny had thought that it would be extremely hard to locate large quantities of metal of higher quality than the body of Sun Prince.

But, as it turned out, he was wrong.

They were currently on top of the Black Turtle's titanic corpse, and that corpse was encased in the remains of similarly titanic battle armor. Surely, the armor deserving of a Great Monster would be made of some truly incredible stuff?

Looking at the nervous Imp, Sunny grinned and pointed to the nearest jagged chunk of tarnished silver.

"Go, buddy. Gorge yourself. Bon appétit!"

The scrawny goblin tentatively turned to look in the direction he was pointing. A few moments later, its eyes dramatically widened.

"I bet it's going to be a bit tough to chew, bu…"

Before Sunny could finish speaking, Imp was already dashing toward

the band of ancient silver with a maddened expression.

He chuckled.

'I guess it smells delicious…'

Chapter-1254: Back to Basics

With Saint standing guard, Nightmare keeping her company, and Imp happily munching on the tarnished silver of the Great Monster's battle armor, Sunny was once again left with nothing much to do.

The seven suns were shining in the three-colored sky. The clear waters of the Great River were flowing as they sparkled in the sunlight. The azure serpent was hungrily circling the dark island, ramming it from time to time to make its wrathful madness known. The Sin of Solace was brooding silently.

A gentle breeze was playing with Sunny's hair.

With a sigh, he swept it back and rose, planning to go find Nephis.

'This is too weird.'

He had expected many situations to arise at the start of the Third Nightmare, but one thing he had not expected was being left with nothing urgent to do.

Walking across the weathered surface of the black rock, Sunny went around a torn band of dull silver, traversed a few patches of moss, and finally laid his eye on Nephis.

She was training.

Holding an unfamiliar longsword, Nephis was practicing a complicated chain of moves, her silver hair dancing in the air. There were beads of sweat on her face, and the hem of the airy tunic was flaring, revealing smooth porcelain skin.

Her movements were limber and flowing, gracefully cascading into each other.

The sight of it was… beautiful.

Neph's swordsmanship was beautiful. And she was beautiful, too.

Illuminated by the dreamlike radiance of the seven suns and dancing with a silvery sword on a carpet of green moss, with her white tunic and alabaster skin, she was like a fairy.

Sunny found himself standing motionlessly in the shadow of a rock outcropping, watching. He had been planning to call out to Nephis, but now… forgetting about it, he silently remained where he was.

Some time passed. Sunny wasn't sure how much exactly.

The island trembled once more.

Eventually, he shifted slightly, as though escaping a reverie, and took a step forward to escape the shadows.

"Hey."

Nephis stopped and leaned on her sword, breathing heavily. Her chest was rising and falling, and her face was slightly flushed. Walking over, Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and offered it to her with a friendly smile.

Accepting the beautiful glass bottle, she sat down and wiped the sweat off her face, then threw her head back and drank greedily.

Sunny glanced at her slender neck and the beads of sweat glistening above the collar of her tunic, which was slightly damp and sticking a little to her body. Then, he looked away.

"Thank you."

After drinking her fill, Nephis returned the Endless Spring to Sunny. He hesitated for a moment, then drank some of the cool, refreshing water himself and sat down near her.

He had completely forgotten what he was going to say.

After a moment or two of peaceful silence, Sunny finally

remembered:

"I've been thinking. Currently, the most powerful combatant among us is the Onyx Saint… my Shadow. You must know that she is a Transcendent Devil now. Should something happen, she would be our best bet against the old snake. We should try augmenting her with both of our Aspects, and test just how strong she would become."

They already knew that Nephis was able to share her flames with his Shadows. But the last time they had attempted it was a lifetime ago, in the basement of his home in NQSC.

Saint had been a mere Ascended Demon back then, while Sunny had been an early-stage Devil. Now, she was a Transcendent Devil, and he was a Tyrant. And Nephis… Nephis was a Terror.

She had absorbed a great number of soul shards during the Battle of the Black Skull, and gained the last few in the Nightmare Desert. The situation back then had been too desperate and frenetic to think about it, and honestly…

Sunny didn't really care about competing with her anymore.

All their powers had risen. Perhaps, with the help of shadows and soul flame, Saint would be able to scratch against the level of strength of a Supreme creature. Of course, there was a big problem… as a being whose flesh was akin to stone, she could not swim, and would immediately sink if pushed into the Great River.

Still, it was worth testing.

Nephis nodded.

"Yes… that sounds like a good idea."

She leaned back a little and closed her eyes, enjoying the cool caress of the breeze with a faint smile.

Sunny watched her silently for a few moments.

Eventually, he said:

"Your swordsmanship has changed."

Neph's favored style was always flowing and unpredictable, but now, it had assumed a strange, almost mystical quality.

Sunny had been a complete novice when they first met. His skill now was incomparable with that of four years ago… he had grown with an explosive, truly astonishing speed.

But Nephis had grown, too.

Perhaps her progress was not quite as stunningly rapid — she did not have the benefit of having an Aspect Legacy to fuel it, after all — but, compared to even the most talented humans, it was still tremendously swift.

Sunny and Nephis had sparred a lot after she returned from the Second Nightmare, but she had been held back by her nascent essence control back then. Now, she had fully come into her power as a Master, and was able to push her skill to entirely new limits… maybe even past them.

Opening her eyes, Nephis smiled.

"I guess it did."

Then, she leaned forward and looked into the distance with a contemplative expression.

"For me… my understanding of swordsmanship went through a transformation after the Ascension."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Sounds serious."

She nodded with a distant look.

"Yes… it was because of learning to control my essence. Awakened possess a rudimentary form of essence control — they broadly enhance their entire bodies with essence, sometimes narrowing the scope down to a particular limb. After learning to do it as easily as

breathing, they can become Masters, and naturally transition to a much more targeted, intricate, and efficient manner of using essence."

Her eyes glinted.

"But I've never been an Awakened. I went straight to being a Master. So, learning to control essence was very hard for me… I had to be conscious of every muscle in my body, every tendon, and every bone. It was like learning to walk again."

A corner of Sunny's mouth twitched as he suppressed a smile. He vividly remembered helping her pass these exact obstacles.

Nephis, meanwhile, continued:

"So, I had to go back to basics. Which groups of muscles do I need to enhance to perform the cut in the most efficient and effective way? My hand, my shoulder, my back, my core, my thighs, my calves… everything had to work in harmony to produce the best result. It took a while to become proficient enough in controlling essence to do it right without thinking.

And, in the process, I became much more aware of my body. I also got submerged in studying the basics, on a much deeper level than before. Going deeper and deeper."

Sunny looked at her with curiosity.

"How deep are we talking about?"

She smiled, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"Force equals mass times acceleration."

He blinked.

'What?'

"What?"

Sunny had not expected to hear a physics formula. And he only knew that this was a physics formula because Teacher Julius had once

thrown a tantrum about his lack of education and forced him to read a bunch of children's schoolbooks.

Nephis smiled.

"That is the basis of swordsmanship — or spearmanship, or any other kind of weapon skill. Fundamentally, it's all about delivering force. The amount of force is dependent on mass and acceleration. Your body is the source of that force, and your weapon is a force multiplier — it concentrates it into a narrow tip, thus making it easier to deliver lethal damage."

She pointed to the sharp tip of her sword.

"Of course, there are more nuances to that. For example, speed does not exist in a vacuum, it is relative to the enemy. Your body also has to borrow from the ground you are standing on. There is balance, centers of gravity, reaction speed… as for the sword itself, there is flexibility, material composition, center of percussion, and so on.

There is also soul essence, Memory enchantments, Attributes, and Aspect Abilities to consider."

Sunny was looking at her incredulously, which caused Nephis to shrug in embarrassment.

"Well, anyway. I've been studying the fundamentals — physics, anatomy, Spell studies, and a bit of other stuff — a lot since returning from the Second Nightmare. And slowly incorporating these insights into my swordsmanship. Uh… something like that…"

He tilted his head, a bit dumbfounded.

'That can't be right. How have we gone from "the essence of combat is murder" to "force equals mass times acceleration"?'

So, Nephis had been studying science... to shore up her fundamentals and evolve her swordsmanship? That sounded very strange.

But the result was apparent… she had clearly improved by leaps and bounds since her Ascension.

Sunny shook his head in disbelief, and then threw a pointed look at her.

His voice was incredulous:

"...Care for a spar?"

Chapter-1255: Dancing Spirits

With a faint smile on her face, Nephis nodded and raised her sword, pointing it at him in invitation. Sunny summoned the Sin of Solace and took a stance opposite her. From the Forgotten Shore to the basement of his home in the peaceful terrace district, they had trained with each other numerous times. This simple sequence of actions was as natural for them as breathing.

However, today, there was an awkward pause.

Sunny scratched the back of his head and glanced at the jade jian.

"That… isn't going to work, is it?"

Nephis seemed to have come to a similar conclusion, looking at him sheepishly.

'No, what the hell… since when does she know how to emote? This is just too cute…'

He coughed.

The problem facing them was that both had grown too powerful — and, subsequently, the weapons they used were too powerful, too. The Sin of Solace was a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, and quite a harrowing one at that.

Sunny was not entirely sure what the level of Neph's longsword was, but it had to be quite a menacing weapon, as well, considering that it had come from the soul arsenal of a Saint.

It would be already bad enough if the Sin of Solace damaged or destroyed it. But what if Sunny was not careful enough and scratched Nephis in the process? The curse of madness carried by the jade blade would either crush her mental defenses, or at least put debilitating

pressure on her mind for a period of time.

Standing some distance away, the spirit of the jian smiled.

"No, no. Don't worry… I'll be gentle."

However, that smile of his was more than a little bit sinister.

Sunny frowned, then dismissed the jade sword and got lost in thought for a few moments. Eventually, a smile of delight appeared on his lips.

"Let's do this."

The shadows around them suddenly moved and flowed toward him, then slowly formed into two inky black swords. One of them was a fearsome odachi, while the other was an elegant longsword.

The odachi was easy to create — this was one of the shapes Sunny had practiced relentlessly, after all. The longsword was a little bit tricky, since he had never created one before. Nevertheless, he was familiar with it as well, and so managed to produce a passable one with some effort.

One would think that manifesting shadows into a weapon would be easier than shaping them into articulated hands, since weapons were static by nature. However, in reality, shaping a sword was just as complex of a task.

A good sword had to possess certain characteristics to feel right in the hand — weight, balance, flexibility and rigidity, center of percussion that Neph had recently mentioned, and so on. It was especially daunting with something like the odachi, which possessed a rigid edge and a flexible spine.

To improve in that regard, Sunny had even studied a bit of blacksmithing on the network. Back then, Clan Valor had been preventing him from visiting the Dream Realm, so he had a lot of free time.

There were many levels to Shadow Manifestation, and shaping was only the most basic of them. Sunny could also affect the material

composition of the manifested shadows, although that demanded a higher essence expenditure. He could manipulate the density of the shadows, for example. He could make them feel like steel or porous limestone.

With some effort, he could even make them slippery or adhesive. In the past, all these internal transformations had been very difficult to achieve, but after inventing Shadow Incarnation, Sunny made a breakthrough in his mastery of Shadow Manifestation as well. Now, it was much easier.

All that was to say…

When Nephis dismissed her longsword and curiously took the shadow weapon from his hand, he secretly held his breath. She weighed the black longsword, then swung it a few times to test how it felt. Then, she nodded in satisfaction.

"That works."

Sunny suppressed a proud smile and raised his odachi.

"Let's begin, then."

Ah, that feeling… he missed it. The Sin of Solace was a piece of art in the form of a jian, but Sunny's heart still lay with blades like this one. Maybe because it was what he had learned swordsmanship with, wielding Midnight Shard on the Forgotten Shore. Not to mention all the fun times he had had as Mongrel in the Dreamscape…

Raising the odachi slightly, Sunny pushed himself forward and attacked.

The two of them were instantly entangled in a breathtaking dance of singing steel. Their swift figures blurred, and soon, nothing but a dark shape and a light shape could be seen, moving across the green moss as they weaved and circled around each other. It was as though two spirits were dancing under the bright light of the radiant suns.

'She really has improved…'

Neph's swordsmanship felt… different. It had always been somewhat

ineffable due to her eerie ability to control both the battlefield and the enemy, but now, there was an even more bizarre quality to her graceful skill.

The steps seemed the same. The cadence seemed the same. The offensive and defensive moves seemed the same, as well.

However, these familiar elements were somehow entirely different, and incredibly more dangerous. Her light steps never failed to deliver her into the best possible position to attack. Each strike packed a devastating punch that seemed too extreme even for an Ascended Terror.

Her defense was nearly impenetrable, alternating between immovable hardness and inviting softness, which dissipated the force of Sunny's attacks and made him feel as though he was drowning in a bog.

No… he was drowning in her flowing sword.

'How is she so different?'

It was not as though Sunny did not understand the same principles Neph had spoken about. The relationship between mass, acceleration, and force… he was intimately familiar with it, as well.

After all, Sunny had long incorporated the ability to change his weight at will into his battle skill, so much so that it had become second nature to him. By manipulating how much his body, or various parts of it, weighed on the fly, he was able to enhance the force of his attacks, secure his balance, and even perform seemingly impossible moves by shifting his center of gravity.

By now, it was like an instinct.

He knew a lot about anatomy, too, both from his own training after the Ascension, mastery of Shadow Dance, and learning how to create shadow hands.

Everything that Nephis had mentioned, Sunny studied too. However, as they fought, he understood the difference between them.

It was the difference between an intuitive, instinctual knowledge and a comprehensive, systemic understanding.

And so, even though Sunny could perceive the essence of what Nephis was doing through Shadow Dance, he couldn't repeat it with the same level of insight.

This was different from fighting Morgan. Morgan was supremely skilled, yes, but the main challenge of dueling her was the dire power of her enchanted body and her sharp, killing will.

Nephis was not using any augmentations, and her will was vast and calm as an ocean.

Beneath that indomitable calmness hid the fiery fury of a roaring flame.

It was pure technique, pure insight, pure mastery.

Pure passion.

Sunny frowned, feeling that he, too, was starting to sweat.

Nephis was strong, but he was strong too. Among human swordsmen, he was perhaps one of the strongest.

His mind was clear, his elusive skill was perilously insidious. He was not the same person he had been before. Antarctica had forged him into someone much more steady, powerful, and deadly.

Their duel… was exhilarating.

Chapter-1256: Reaching for the Stars

Sunny and Nephis climbed back into the familiar fissure only after the seven suns plunged into the waters of the Great River. They hungrily consumed the last few ration packs from the Covetous Coffer, and then settled on the weathered rock to sleep.

Saint was standing guard above the fissure, and Nightmare was near to protect their dreams. So, they decided not to alternate and let themselves rest through the whole night.

The world was swiftly enveloped in darkness. The nocturnal glow of the Great River did not reach the depths of the fissure, and there were no stars or the moon in the sky. The world was entirely black, as if they had plunged into an endless void.

Listening to the soft sounds of Neph's breath, Sunny let the sense of fatigue overwhelm him.

He was tired. However, it was not the cruel, chilling exhaustion he had suffered often in the past months… instead, this fatigue was of a satisfying and pleasurable kind. Something he had not felt in a while.

Sunny had learned a lot during their training today. They had practiced together until the sunset, and in the process, both had done their best to make the opponent sweat. He had not held back much, and neither had Nephis.

In the end, Sunny found himself lacking. Even after all this time, she was still like a distant star… one he could see, but never touch. At least in terms of swordsmanship and mastery of battle.

It should have been disheartening, but he found it strangely encouraging instead. Sunny felt as though he had been shown a new

horizon… something to strive for, as well as a clear direction to reach for the stars.

He also realized that there were still flaws in his mastery of Shadow Dance. That was a valuable revelation in and of itself… armed with it, he could refine and perfect his formless style, bringing it closer to the next step.

That said… Sunny felt very strange right now.

It was because he had realized that, currently, he was more powerful than Nephis.

Yes, she was a better fighter than him. However, Sunny had so many tools at his disposal. He also had two Transcendent Devils and an Awakened Terror on his side. If the two of them were to battle seriously… he wasn't entirely sure who would be left standing at the end, but he knew that his odds were much higher than hers.

It was a… vast, tumultuous, and deeply unsettling emotion.

What surprised him the most, however, was how weak of a reaction it aroused in him. There had been a time when becoming more powerful than Nephis was all he ever thought about. But now… he felt almost indifferent.

It was what it was. There was no point in racing to the finish line, anyway. That line would not change.

It did not matter which one of them became a Terror first, because sooner or later, both of them would end up as Titans. It did not matter that Sunny was ahead for the first time — her Ascended Ability was not of a kind that added to one's power, that was all.

They were in the same boat, anyway.

Perhaps he could allow himself to feel that way because he was more secure about the Shadow Bond, and the power she held over him. Nephis had proven that she had no intention of ever using it… and he had grown more confident in his ability to make one or both of them die even if she did.

'How romantic…'

He sighed, feeling calm and cozy in the darkness that enveloped them.

After a while, Sunny asked:

"Hey, Neph… are you asleep yet?"

There were few moments of silence before she answered.

"No."

Hidden in the darkness, he grinned.

"...How is the sleeping bag? Is it warm?"

There had been only two sleeping bags in the Covetous Coffer — one that Sunny used in the wilderness, and a spare one. Sadly, he had ripped through one of them when the azure serpent first made the dark island quake, so now, there was only one.

Sunny had chosen to sleep on the weathered rock, relying on the unique qualities of the Marble Shell to keep him comfortable. Luckily, the Great River seemed to have a mild climate, so he was not particularly cold. The fissure protected them from the wind, as well.

So, he had no problem letting Nephis use the only remaining sleeping bag.

However... that didn't mean that he wouldn't tease her about it...

A calm answer came from the darkness.

"Yes, I am warm. It is of high quality."

As the grin froze on Sunny's face, he sighed.

'She's really… too thick to be teased. Damn'

A few moments later, Neph asked:

"Oh… do you want me to hand it over? It is your sleeping bag… it

would only be right for the owner to use it…"

Sunny flinched.

"No, no! Keep it. That's not what I wanted at all."

'Gods, she's hopeless...'

There was a long pause. Then, Neph's voice came from the darkness again:

"Ah! I see. You want to use it together?"

Hearing that, Sunny's entire body shuddered.

"What? No! That's not what I meant at all! Who do you take me for? I was just teasing you!"

Suddenly, he heard a soft chuckle. Turning his head, Sunny saw Neph covering her mouth with a hand. She was suppressing a laugh…

His eyes widened.

'Wait… a reverse tease? I've been played!'

His heart ached. How embarrassing...

He stared at Nephis incredulously for a few moments, then laid down and looked back at the jagged line of the distant black sky. A moment or two later, he suddenly laughed, too.

"This is… this is just too ridiculous…"

Nephis lowered her hand, then asked in an amused tone:

"What is?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I mean... we are sailing a river of an Unholy Titan's blood on the corpse of a Great Monster. Moving back in time. And giggling like children…"

She remained silent for a while before saying in her usual calm tone:

"Yes. It does sound a little ridiculous."

Then, there was a comfortable silence between them.

Sunny looked at the black sky for a while. Soon, a sigh escaped from his lips.

He lingered for a long time, then turned his head to look at her again.

"Neph? Can I ask you something?"

She turned her head to face him, as well, even though she couldn't see anything in the dark.

"Sure."

Sunny hesitated.

But, eventually, he still asked:

"Can you tell me what happened to you in the Second Nightmare?"

A hint of amusement slowly disappeared from her eyes. Her faint smile was erased, as well.

Nephis remained silent for a long time, her expression turning bleak and distant.

Then, she sighed.

"...Okay. I'll tell you."

Her voice sounded strangely forlorn.

Turning away, Nephis looked into the darkness and said:

"In my Second Nightmare, I was a woman made of stone. Like your Shadow, but also different… defective…"

Chapter-1257: In the Darkness

Nephis looked into the darkness as she spoke in an even voice:

"It happened after the Demon of Destiny had his falling out with the Goddess of the Black Skies… I think. But before Hope escaped her chains, and the daemons rose in rebellion against the gods. In the darkness… in the true darkness that fills the halls and caverns of the Underworld. Below the Hollow Mountains."

She sighed.

"When I opened my eyes, I was a woman made of stone. A crude, clumsy, and defective precursor of the Stone Saints. I was laying on a mountain of abandoned statues just like me, all of them broken, discarded, and forsaken. Everything around me was enveloped by cold darkness, with not a spark of light or hint of warmth anywhere. There was just me, my broken siblings, and the lonesome silence."

Sunny shifted slightly.

"True darkness?"

Nephis slowly nodded.

"Yes… those mountains are called hollow, but in fact, they are full of darkness. Their hollows are like great reservoirs of it — it is where darkness lives, and where it comes from. True darkness is very much like this river, in fact. Legends say that a terrible creature was slain by the gods once, at the dawn of time, and that its blood seeped into the earth.

This is what true darkness is — the dark creature's blood."

Sunny shivered. That dark creature… to be the source of all true darkness, of the entire element of darkness, it had to be something far

greater than an Unholy Titan.

It must have been one of the unknown, then. A being of the Void…

Ignorant of what he was thinking about, Nephis continued after a short pause:

"The Hollow Mountains are a scar left by the death of that creature. And so, most of true darkness remains below them. This is the place that Nether made his home. However, it was not entirely empty… while he ruled the Underworld, there were many others living in the darkness."

She lingered for a moment.

"There were some who followed Nether, the remains of the army he had led to wage war on Storm God. They lived in the great hollows within the peaks. There were also his children, the Stone Saints, who lived below the mountains, in the heart of the Underworld. And there were also creatures who lived even lower, near the very bottom of the dark abyss. That is where the pile of discarded statues was."

Sunny frowned.

"Wait… Nether waged war on Storm God? On his own, before the rebellion?"

A pale smile appeared on Neph's face.

"Yes… it was his own private affair. I don't know the details of his relationship with Storm God or why it ended in resentment. But he must have taken it to heart, enough so that he assembled an army and stormed the divine realm. Of course, he lost.

Most of his army was decimated, and he secluded himself in the Underworld, becoming its ruler and losing himself in the obsession of trying to create the Stone Saints."

She paused for a moment.

"He must have been lonely and heartbroken, to create a whole race of living beings just to keep him company… or maybe it was his defiant,

prideful way of challenging the gods. After all, only the gods could create living things. Despite that… somehow, Nether succeeded. But he failed many times before achieving success."

Nephis grew silent for a moment, and then said:

"I… was one of these failures."

A quiet sigh escaped from her lips.

"There were many creatures in the darkness at the roots of the Underworld, all of them abandoned and discarded, just like me. Some of them were the results of Nether's failed attempts to create the Stone Saints. Some of them were outcasts and derelicts for whom there was no place in the world above anymore. All of them were pitiful and weak… and I was the weakest of them all."

Nephis stared silently into the darkness for a while. The expression on her face was sad and… remorseful?

Eventually, she spoke softly:

"I was just a Sleeper, after all. Even with the Echo I gained in the Nightmare Desert, out there in the darkness, my strength was pitiful. Ah, it was such a… blow. I never realized how much pride I took in being strong before that Nightmare. I had always relied on my strength… I had always told myself that I had to be strong.

If only I was strong like my father… if only I was strong, stronger, the strongest… then I wouldn't break apart. And the people around me wouldn't need to suffer on my behalf, either."

Sunny remained silent, remembering Neph's nightmare that he had visited after she returned to the waking world. He also thought about his own desperate pursuit of strength.

Nephis smiled.

"But in the Nightmare, all my strength was worthless. All my pride was worthless, too. All I had was weakness, and so, I had to learn… that personal power was not something I should rely on, or could rely on. It had always seemed so important, but in the end, it turned out

to be a deceitful mirage."

A slight frown appeared on her face.

"You see, there were not only the outcasts and discarded creatures like me in the darkness at the roots of the Underworld. There were other things, as well… terrifying things that were born from the darkness. These things hunted us. There were ancient horrors dwelling in the very depths of the abyss, as well. Sometimes, they would crawl from below to devour us.

No one in the Underworld cared about what happened to us, if they even remembered our existence. The aloof Demon of Destiny, the first generation of the Stone Saints, and the remains of the Demon's soldiers… none would protect us. The forsaken had to fend for themselves. But we were weak, and pitiful. And, most of all, we were divided."

Her voice shook a little.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then asked carefully:

"So, what did you do? How did you survive?"

Nephis took a deep breath.

"I… I had to accept my weakness, and learn how to survive despite being weak. The lesson was harsh, demeaning, and painful. But I had no choice but to learn it. So, I coaxed, persuaded, deceived, enticed, and cajoled the other forsaken creatures living in the darkness. But, most of all... I inspired them.

You see, I realized that there was something much sharper than my wit, much more persuasive than my words, and much more compelling than my lies."

She paused for a moment.

"That something… was desire."

Chapter-1258: Last Light

Hidden in the darkness, Sunny flinched. The image of the piece of wet wood littered with demented runes suddenly appeared in his mind, as did the word repeating in the runes over and over again.

Wish… desire.

Be careful of what you wish for.

Be careful what you desire.

He frowned while Nephis continued somberly:

"All I had to do was instill a desire in the forsaken. A desire for a better life, longer life… safer life. A yearning for things that they had either never known or long forgotten — comfort, companionship, warmth. I had to give them hope. Because we couldn't survive alone, but we could survive together. Most of these creatures were solitary and numb, resigned to their dark existence.

The weight of their hopelessness and despair was too great for me to pull them from it. But, by igniting a yearning in their hearts… I could make them push themselves forward with their own strength."

She grew silent once again, and remained so for a long time this time.

When Nephis spoke again, her voice was almost a whisper.

"...We gathered together, and built a village. It had tall walls and stone houses. It even had a large hall for us to gather and enjoy each other's company. And, for a while, life was good. United, we could protect ourselves from the creatures of darkness, and hide from the abyssal visitors behind the tall walls. I thought… I thought that I was on the right track.

There were old creatures in the village that taught me their knowledge and wisdom. There were those who had been warriors once. I learned from them, as well. I was the weakest one, but I was liked and valued. Because I could create light, which all of them had forgotten."

White sparks ignited in her eyes before trembling and disappearing.

Neph's face grew motionless.

"But then, someone in the village vanished. And then, someone else. At first, I thought that they had left. But after the third one was gone, the fourth, the fifth… we all realized that something was wrong. They didn't leave. They were taken.

After that, every night — what served as night in the Underworld — someone would disappear. We were under attack."

She paused.

"We tried everything in our power to find and confront the creature that was killing the villagers. We enhanced our defenses, increased our vigilance. We investigated, we explored the surrounding darkness for clues. We set traps, carved sorcerous runes into the stone, and placed lures. We even sent an envoy to plead for help from the children of Nether. But nothing worked."

Neph's voice was growing dull.

"No help came. Nothing we did managed to stop the disappearances. In fact, it only grew worse… at first, the forsaken were just vanishing, but later, their mutilated corpses started to appear around the village, strewn on stalagmites for us to see. As though the creature was leaving them there to mock us. It was then that I understood… that I... had not created a safe haven for us… and instead...

simply set the table for the creature of darkness."

Her face was motionless, and her voice was even. However, Sunny could feel how fragile that mask was at the moment.

Neph took a deep breath.

"...Eventually, everything collapsed. Those who were still alive cursed me and abandoned the village… tried to. They didn't make it far. There were only two of us left inside the empty walls — myself, and another one of the broken statues. The first one who had become my companion, and followed me almost from the very start.

We… we locked ourselves inside the village hall, not knowing what else to do, and barricaded the doors. However, the creature still came. I didn't see it enter, but I could feel that the darkness around us was suddenly alive."

Sunny looked at her carefully.

"So… how did you defeat it?"

Nephis slowly shook her head.

"I… did not. I had thought about giving one last, desperate fight. But as soon as I sensed it, I knew that there was no hope. That thing… it wasn't something I could fight. So I spoke to it. I tried to appease it.

I tried to persuade it. I even knelt and begged it. I tried everything I could, and I could feel it watching me, listening to me. Surrounding me."

For a while, there was silence.

In that silence, Nephis shivered and let out a heavy sigh.

"...In the end, the creature took my companion, but spared me. I don't know why. All I know is that the darkness felt empty again, and I was suddenly alone in that darkness. I was the only one left in the village that we had built. Everyone else… all of them… were dead."

Her voice trembled a little.

"That… was the end of my Nightmare."

Sunny sighed and sat up, summoning the Endless Spring.

Nephis had talked for a while, after all. Her throat must have been parched.

Approaching her in the darkness, Sunny sat down and used his nail to clink against the glass bottle a couple of times, to let her know where it was. Nephis took the bottle and took a small sip, then looked at the ground.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"The appraisal… do you remember how the Spell appraised your performance?"

Nephis shook her head.

"I was… pretty out of it, there at the end. I remember standing in the middle of the empty hall. And the next thing I remember was you calling me by my True Name, at the Academy."

Sunny sighed, then leaned forward and lightly patted her on the shoulder.

"Well, if it means anything… I think you did well. You did really well, Neph."

He felt her body tremble slightly, and then took the Endless Spring from her fingers.

"Thank you for telling me. Now, let's sleep…"

He lingered for a moment, and then added lightly:

"...Please be careful with the sleeping bag, though. Don't rip it. It's really expensive!"

She nodded, then smiled faintly and lay down, turning away.

Sunny looked at Neph's back for a few moments, then silently returned to his own sleeping spot and sprawled on the weathered rock.

He stared at the black sky for a few moments before closing his eyes.

'...Would I have survived that Nightmare?'

Sunny really did not know. He could also tell that Nephis had brushed past many perilous fights and dire torments that she must have endured there... in the darkness...

All alone.

His heart was heavy, but before too long, the exhaustion won, sending him into the embrace of sleep.

Chapter-1259: Pristine Soul

In the morning, the island shook again. Sunny opened his eyes and reached through the shadow sense, checking in on Saint. Since the taciturn knight was standing calmly above the fissure, he relaxed and yawned with great satisfaction.

He felt incredibly refreshed.

The dark island was in one piece, and nothing was pouncing to kill them. Life was great.

He sat up, leaned on the slope of the fissure, then rubbed his eyes and looked around. Nephis was already up, doing light stretches a few meters away. Sunny watched her for a few moments, then forced himself to avert his gaze.

The sound of her even, yet fragile voice resounding from the darkness still echoed in his ears.

Neph's Second Nightmare… was different from his own, just like her First Nightmare had been. She had not battled immortal Saints to free an imprisoned daemon from divine chains. Instead, she had tried to save a small group of pitiful and forlorn creatures, only to watch them all die.

Nephis had been the last one standing on the Forgotten Shore, and after traveling alone through the purgatory of the Nightmare Desert, she built a tiny community amidst the cold darkness, only to watch it be destroyed.

She had been so strong, but the Nightmare made her weak. She had been so proud, but the Nightmare made her beg for mercy on her knees. He wasn't sure he could imagine how painful it was for her, to sacrifice the two things that were at the core of her sense of self.

Yes, Neph had not slain impossibly powerful enemies with her radiant sword in the Nightmare… but, for her, wielding a sword against an overwhelming foe was not something to be feared.

Maybe that was why the Spell always tried to break her in some other, more cruel way.

Sunny looked down at the weathered surface of the black rock.

'The Spell… I wonder…'

How had the Spell appraised Neph's performance in the Second Nightmare?

Sunny was not sure, but he had an inkling that the appraisal was exceedingly high. If his theory was right, that was, and the appraisal depended on how much the challenger had changed the flow of fate. In that regard…

He suspected that what Nephis had done was miraculous. She had wanted to change the fates of the forsaken creatures living in the darkness at the bottom of the Underworld.

In that task, she failed.

…However, she had succeeded in changing something else.

She changed the harrowing creature that had come from the darkness.

Had the creature been compelled by her words? By her pleas?

Or… had it been infected by the same yearning that Neph had ignited in the hearts of the forsaken? Had the creature of darkness been poisoned by a hint of an indescribable longing? Had it learned to long for light?

If the heart of an abyssal being powerful enough to be a horror in the Underworld had been changed, even ever so slightly, then Sunny could not really imagine what ripples that change could cause in the great tapestry of fate.

So, the Spell could have appraised Neph's performance as glorious.

But that… that was not important.

Because Nephis herself did not see it that way. The Spell and its carriers had different criteria for success, after all. The Spell might be satisfied with Neph's performance, but Neph obviously saw it as a bitter, irredeemable failure. The tone of her voice yesterday had said it all.

Continuing to stare at the ground, Sunny sighed.

After returning to the waking world, Nephis seemed much more… mellow than before. But her resolve to kill the Sovereigns and destroy the Spell also seemed much more stalwart than before.

Now that he knew the truth… many things about her past words and actions made sense.

'Gods… just what am I going to do with her?'

Sunny glanced at Nephis, who was oblivious to his thoughts, with a complicated expression.

There was one more thing he had to consider.

The description of Neph's Aspect, Light Bringer…

[You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

Wasn't it very similar to the trial the Spell had presented her with in the Second Nightmare?

The Ascended Ability she had unlocked as a result was called [Longing], too.

Longing, yearning, desire… wish…

Was the inexhaustible longing to destroy the Spell that burned like fire in Neph's heart so powerful that it made her soul incorruptible?

He had pondered about this Ability of hers before, but now, Sunny saw it in a new light. It had seemed like a rather useless power to have, outside of very rare circumstances… like facing the Skinwalker.

However…

If that Ability made Nephis immune to the Corruption, then wasn't it actually the most broken and unbelievably preposterous Ability he had ever heard about?

After all, even Weaver had to sever their arm when it got infected with the Corruption. Not only was the great and terrible Demon of Fate not immune to Corruption, he or she was even powerless in front of it.

…Just what was Nephis, exactly?

And, more importantly, what was she to him?

The subject of his thoughts, meanwhile, finished her stretching exercises, pulled the fastened strap of her white tunic back to her pale shoulder, and looked around.

Nephis smiled.

"You're up?"

Sunny smiled back.

"Yeah. How are you feeling?"

It seemed as though she had recovered from opening the old wounds to tell him about her Second Nightmare yesterday.

However, a moment later, Neph's smiling face darkened a little. She sighed.

"I wanted to make breakfast. But… we have no food left."

Sunny tilted his head, then looked down.

They were literally sitting on a mountain of meat. But with the Azure

Serpent circling the carcass of the Black Turtle, diving into the river to procure even a little bit of it was an utterly lethal task.

He shook his head with resignation.

"We'll solve that problem when the time comes."

Nephis nodded, lingered for a moment, then pointed to the sleeping bag.

"See? I didn't rip it."

Sunny stared at her, trying to determine whether she was being serious or playing a joke on him. These days, it was getting hard to tell…

'Which bastard is being such a bad influence on my straight-laced and awkward Neph? I'm going to bash their teeth in!'

He remained silent for a few moments, then grinned.

"Good. Because, you know… you still owe me for that projector…"

Chapter-1260: Leisure Cruise

Time flowed lazily.

…Both literally and figuratively.

The current of the Great River was pulling the corpse of the Black Turtle into the past, and several days passed in a strange, but pleasant idleness. The seven suns rose and fell, drowning in the shimmering waters. The sky was like a dreamlike painting of lilac, azure, crimson, and jet black.

The ancient serpent continued to circle the dark island, slowly consuming the bleeding meat of the Great Monster it had killed, and watching Sunny and Nephis enjoy their unexpected respite.

The two of them were spending their time leisurely. Feeling the need to rest and recuperate after the nightmarish gauntlet of the white desert, they were not in a hurry to strain themselves too much.

They slept peacefully through the nights, rising when warm sunlight flowed into the narrow fissure, and spent most of the days together. Sometimes, they would lay on the soft moss side by side and look at the sky in comfortable silence. Sometimes, they would train, sparring with each other until sweat covered their bodies.

Sometimes, they would talk, discussing their experiences in the past year and various pieces of knowledge they had picked up along the way.

They also spent some time apart. Nephis was busy practicing her swordsmanship, often requesting Saint to aid her as a training partner. After sending her and his Shadow off, Sunny would get busy with his own endeavors.

He spent a lot of time studying the strange and hauntingly complex

weave of the Key of the Estuary. This Memory was a great mystery that had to be solved… even after showing it to Nephis, Sunny had not a single inkling of what it was supposed to do, and where it had come from.

So, he settled for the slow approach of meticulously examining each and every thread of its somber tapestry. Depending on luck, this task could take him many months to complete, but there was no harm in starting early.

Once his head started to ache from studying the black weave, Sunny would sit silently near the slopes of the island and watch the Azure Serpent prowl. He would close his eyes and sense the Great Beast's shadow. He would try to memorize its every scale, scar, and movement.

Even though their situation was peaceful right now, he knew that the peace would not last indefinitely. The chances were that they would have to battle the abomination eventually. And so, Sunny wanted to gleam its essence and commit it to his memory.

Training his swordsmanship with Nephis, studying the Estuary Key, observing the Azure Serpent, and resting idly… these were the things that filled his days.

Of course, other things were happening on the dark island, as well.

Imp was still busy devouring the bands of tarnished silver that encased the Black Turtle's body. His progress was slow, but the gluttonous goblin seemed beyond himself with delight. His scrawny figure could often be seen sprawled on the black rocks, utterly engorged.

The Sin of Solace was still there, following Sunny like a jaded wraith. Its litany of snide comments and contemptuous remarks never lessened, slowly driving him mad. Sunny endured as best as he could, and luckily, the spirit of the cursed sword was not nearly as talkative as it had been before. Nevertheless, the apparition put him in many awkward situations with Nephis.

Nightmare was slowly subjugating new dreams into his unseen army.

Almost every night, the counter of the Dream Curse would go up by at least one or two. The source of these defeated nightmares were, of course, Sunny and Nephis… it seemed that their minds were still haunted by the events of the past.

Or maybe it was just the nature of the Tomb of Ariel. Despite its breathtaking facade, it was a land worthy of its architect... a land of dread.

It was also as desolate and empty as it was beautiful. Every day, Sunny and Nephis would study the northern horizon, hoping to see the signs of land — or anything at all — far in the distance. But each time, all that met them was an endless expanse of flowing water.

Their hunger slowly grew. Although Masters were much more resilient than mundane humans, they were still the same… they needed sustenance to survive, just like any human would.

Their bodies were still strong, but they would start to wither before too long. Before that happened, Sunny and Nephis were going to have to find a way to harvest some of the Black Turtle's meat.

The Azure Serpent raised its head from the water every time it devoured more, as if to mock them.

'Ah… I'm hungry.'

Sunny was sitting on a luxurious wooden chair, which was positioned near the slopes of the Black Turtle's carapace, facing north. His shadows surrounded him, lazily sprawled on the black rocks and enjoying the dreamlike vista of the Great River — only the naughty one had wandered off to enjoy the view of Nephis training instead.

Dismissing the Estuary Key, Sunny rubbed his temples and stretched his legs.

'I don't get it… I just don't get it. I don't recognize any of these weave elements. Not even their vague purpose. The more I look at it, the more sure I am that it wasn't… won't be?... created by me.'

Whoever had created the Key of the Estuary was a far greater sorcerer than Sunny was, or could ever dream to be. At least that was

how it seemed.

'Alright… that's enough for today. The old snake should be showing its ugly mug any minute now. I really hope that it's as tired of staring at me as I am tired of staring at it…'

Sunny glanced at the wide patch of bloody water surrounding the shell of the Great Turtle in anticipation, lingered for a few moments, and then frowned.

Something… something was wrong with that picture.

He stared at the water for a while, his scowl deepening.

Then, Sunny slowly raised his eyes and looked at the sky.

His pupils widened slightly.

There, in the boundless blue expanse, far away…

A black dot had appeared at some point.

Chapter-1261: A Butterfly Flapping Its Wings

There was a black dot in the sky, far in the distance, slowly moving in the direction of the dark island. At first, Sunny felt a glimmer of hope ignite in his heart as he remembered a similar situation from the past.

That time, it had turned out to be Kai.

But, this time…

This time, his intuition was ringing alarm bells, and a cold feeling of dread crept from somewhere to grip him with icy claws.

Sitting on the Shadow Chair with his legs crossed, Sunny leaned back and sighed.

"...Crap."

With that, he exploded with a flurry of activity.

First, Sunny dismissed his precious chair and dashed toward the middle of the island. At the same time, he sent a mental command to Saint.

Nephis and she were currently engaged in a furious sword fight. Light and darkness were intertwined in a shimmering whirlpool of sharp steel, and the graceful knight's onyx figure was starkly contrasted against the rippling white tunic and alabaster skin of her slender opponent.

Following Sunny's order, Saint froze. The tip of Neph's sword stopped a split second later, hovering millimeters away from the slit of her visor.

Nephis frowned, then retracted her sword and looked around.

There was a shadow on a rock outcropping that protruded from the ground a few meters away. It seemed to belong to a young man, and was currently waving its arms in the air while pointing at the sky.

She swiftly turned around and looked up, then dashed away a moment later.

'That's done…'

Running as fast as he could, Sunny leaped over a murky puddle of water and landed near a half-eaten fragment of tarnished silver. The scrawny figure of Imp could be seen nearby, laying on the ground with a blissful smile on his fiendish face. His hands were rubbing his ballooning belly with delight.

"Stand up, buddy!"

The gluttonous goblin opened his eyes and stared at Sunny in confusion, then awkwardly tried to rise to his feet. However, outweighed by his full stomach, Imp lost his balance and promptly plopped back down.

"Ah, we don't have time for this!"

Sunny leaned down, grabbed the weakly struggling fiend, and hoisted him on his shoulder.

'What… the hell…'

Just how much had the little bastard swallowed up?!

Even with the strength of an Ascended Tyrant, Sunny was struggling to carry Imp. His veins swelled, and a befuddled expression appeared on his face. Commanding the shadows to wrap themselves around his body, he grunted and continued to run.

A dozen seconds later, Sunny reached the edge of the familiar fissure and unceremoniously tossed the little fiend down. Then, he threw one more look at the sky and, noticing that the black dot had already drawn nearer, jumped into the deep ravine himself.

Before too long, Nephis and he were side by side, pressing themselves into the weathered slope of the fissure as they desperately tried to calm down their breathing. Saint and Fiend were nearby, the former standing calmly, the latter hugging Sunny's thigh.

Nightmare was there as well, hiding within the deep darkness enveloping the bottom of the gorge in his shadow form.

Lastly, a beautiful amphora of white clay was standing on the ground in front of them, its surface decorated with mesmerizing patterns. It was another one of the Memories Summer Knight had given to Nephis, and its purpose was to mask their presence.

…Gods only knew if the amphora was going to work or not.

Out of Sunny's five shadows, one had to volunteer to leave its area of effect and serve as a scout, though.

Well… perhaps "volunteer" was the wrong word.

Since the gloomy shadow had performed a few dangerous tasks recently, and the happy fool was not someone Sunny would ever entrust an important matter to, the next in seniority had to go. So, the creepy guy was currently hiding a few meters away from the edge of the fissure, staring creepily at the sky.

The Sin of Solace was keeping it company with a bored expression on his face.

The sparks swirling around Sunny's hand formed into an emerald flute, and he covered them with a dome of silence. Then, he let out a shaky breath.

"I… I see it."

Nephis looked at him intently, then asked in a low voice:

"What is it?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

Slowly, his expression turned grim.

"It's a… butterfly."

Indeed, a butterfly was descending toward the island. From afar, it seemed like an ethereal and beautiful creature. But as it drew closer, Sunny couldn't help but shiver.

The butterfly's wings and back were black, but its body and underbelly were the color of white bone. It had six long, seemingly fragile legs that ended in sharp points, and two enormous, faceted eyes that were like orbs of pure darkness. Between them was a disturbingly long, oily-black beak, which was currently bent into a spiral like an elephant's trunk.

Two antennae rose from its head, pushed back by the current of the wind.

…Apart from that, the butterfly was at least a hundred meters in size.

It was both exquisitely beautiful and deeply revolting. But, most of all, it was deeply frightening.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's another Great Monster."

His heart was beating rapidly in his chest, and his back was covered with cold sweat.

'Great. This is just great! Great… ha, it literally is…'

By his side, Nephis scowled.

"What about…"

The monstrous butterfly was obviously intending to land on the island, but at that moment, the crimson water parted, and the Azure Serpent's scaled snout rose into the air. Pierced by a mad gaze of its cloudy eyes, the Great Monster suddenly seemed wary.

It moved its wings and altered the direction of its flight, circling the corpse of the Black Turtle from above instead of diving down to land on the black rock. The butterfly's huge eyes were aimed at the

ancient serpent, and its antennae twitched rhythmically.

The great beast of the river bared its bloodied fangs and let out a furious roar, as if announcing its claim of the remains of the titanic turtle.

'This demented old snake…'

Did the serpent not want to live? Why was it going around challenging Great Monsters?'

'Am I really such a delicacy?!'

Sunny did not know what the giant butterfly was thinking, but one thing was certain.

It did not like that serpent's challenge. It did not like it at all…

Chapter-1262: A Shrimp Between Two Whales

Sunny described what was happening in a hushed voice. He didn't really need to whisper, considering that they were surrounded by a dome of silence, but it made him feel better.

And what was happening… appeared pretty clear.

The monstrous butterfly had been attracted by the smell of blood and arrived to feast on the corpse of the Black Turtle that the Azure Serpent had so laboriously killed. The Azure Serpent, meanwhile, was having none of it.

In fact, judging by the madness burning in its eyes, the Great Beast was overcome with the bloody desire to rip the giant butterfly apart as well.

'This thing… really doesn't know what's good for it, huh?'

What was the reason for the Azure Serpent's reckless insolence?

Humans often described Nightmare Creatures as mad, but that description was not entirely accurate. The abominations were indeed insane, but that did not mean that they lacked sanity. Rather, it meant that their sanity was perverted, sinister, ineffable, and entirely different from what humans deemed sane.

So why would the Great Beast risk its life fighting much more powerful Monsters?

Was it indeed madness? Was it pride? Was it reluctance to give up such an enormous prize?

…Or was it more reluctant to surrender two human souls that burned

the flames of divinity to the stronger abomination?

Whatever the reason was, the stubborn leviathan seemed ready to battle the monstrous butterfly to the death.

The butterfly let out an indescribable sound. The waters of the Great River suddenly grew restless, rippling as they were assaulted by the powerful sonic waves. The serpent roared again, rising higher above the river's tumultuous surface.

"...I think they are going to fight."

Sunny was not sure what it meant for the two of them. He was belatedly happy about his decision to abandon the skies and seek shelter on the shell of the Black Turtle… if something like that butterfly had caught him in the air, he would have surely been dead in an instant.

However, now that Nephis and he were trapped on the dark island, their fates seemed to be swaying on the edge of a perilous abyss. They were deeply unsure of their ability to slay a Great Beast… but a Great Monster was far more dreadful.

They were only alive now because the Azure Serpent either lacked the ability or was reluctant to crawl out of the water. If the abominable butterfly won the battle, though, nothing was going to stop it from doing just that. Then, their shelter would turn into a deadly trap.

So, no matter how strange it sounded, Sunny had no choice but to root for the familiar Great Beast that had been staring at them hungrily for many days, wishing to swallow them whole.

The Azure Serpent had already killed one Great Monster… maybe the mad snake would be able to pull off another miracle.

Finally coming to a decision, the butterfly waved its wings and plummeted down, landing on the shell of the Black Turtle a moment later. The entire island shook from the devastating force of the impact.

The creepy shadow remained motionless as it looked up at the six

incredibly thin and long legs of the monster. The pale body of the butterfly was high above the ground, and its wings were open, covering a vast area in deep darkness. Now that it was closer, Sunny could see that it was covered in thick scales, with white hairs growing between them.

There was a complicated pattern on the creature's wings, as well, coalescing into a strange image… an image… and image of…

Sunny hurriedly commanded the shadow to look away as a strange certainty that he should never, ever try to look directly at the pattern covering the butterfly's wings flooded his mind.

'D—damnation…'

"Sunny? What is happening?"

He sucked in a shaky breath.

"They're just… staring at each other…"

The butterfly shifted slightly, the sharp tips of its chitinous legs striking sparks from the black rock. Its trunk-like mouth slowly unfurled, turning into a fearsome black spear dozens of meters long.

The abomination let out another harrowing screech, then suddenly struck the surface of the dead turtle's shell with its beak. One, two, three times… the island quaked, but not even a thin crack appeared on the rock. The butterfly froze for a moment, then twisted its head, looking at the Azure Serpent.

It seemed reluctant to go into the water.

'Well… of course. One is a flying abomination, and the other is a sea creature. The butterfly has to go into the water if it wants to gorge on the Black Turtle's meat, but that would mean fighting the Azure Serpent… and on the enemy's home ground, no less.'

Maybe… maybe it would simply retreat.

Just as Sunny thought that, the butterfly suddenly folded its wings and lunged forward.

There was no hesitation, no warning. Just a deafening sonic boom and a harrowing black and white blur that suddenly shot toward the serpent like a gigantic javelin.

A hurricane gale rose from the confounding fury of the Great Monster's lunge.

"It's attacking!"

A split second later, an enormous pillar of foaming crimson water rose into the sky. The serpent seemed to have managed to avoid the abominable butterfly's obliterating charge. However, its sharp legs tore at the sea creature's azure body.

The Great Monster easily dove into the water, as though the depths were its home. Both creatures were suddenly hidden from view, and only the shaking of the island and the colossal waves that were assaulting its slopes showed that a titanic battle was happening underwater.

"They're fighting."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then gave him a strange look.

"Sunny… where are they fighting, in relation to our position?"

He stared at her in confusion, then said:

"Below water, to the left of the turtle's tail."

She lingered a bit, then took a deep breath.

"Then, they're on the opposite side from the turtle's head. Where the entry wound is. So… while the serpent is preoccupied… shall we dive down and harvest some meat?"

He opened his mouth, startled.

Then, he slowly closed it again.

"Dive down? Harvest meat? Are you… are you crazy?!"

'Damn... I said it again!'

Nephis looked at him very seriously and shook her head.

"No, I'm not crazy. I'm... hungry."

Chapter-1263: Sea of Blood

What they were trying to do did, indeed, seem a little crazy. There were two great abominations fighting on one side of the Black Turtle, and Nephis wanted to dive into the water on the other side to steal some of the turtle's meat.

Because she was hungry.

But, of course, it was really not that unhinged of a plan. She had not suggested it out of a burning desire to satiate her belly — rather, it was out of necessity. The longer they were to go hungry, the weaker they would become. The weaker they became, the slimmer their chances of survival would be.

Neither Nephis nor Sunny knew if they would get a better chance to harvest the Black Turtle's meat than now, when the Azure Serpent was distracted. In fact, they did not even know if they would live long enough to enjoy the fruits of this perilous decision.

If the monstrous butterfly won, they would probably die soon. But there was nothing they could really do about that… so, the only thing they could do was prepare for the other outcome to the best of their ability.

Grimacing, Sunny looked away and shook Imp off his thigh.

"Curses…"

Then, he gritted his teeth and started climbing out of the fissure.

'Hungry… she's hungry… hungry, is she?! Just… just what sin did I commit in my past life to be cursed with all these gluttonous women?!'

Oblivious to his heartfelt plea, Nephis followed.

It took Sunny just a few moments to scale the vertical slope of the deep fissure and climb onto the quaking surface of the dark island. It was shaking and swaying, pushed by the harrowing fury of the unseen battle that was happening below the waves.

A split second later, Saint landed nearby, and a vast shadow crawled from the darkness to take the shape of a tenebrous steed. Neph arrived last, slowed down a little by the need to carry the fragile amphora in one of her hands.

Imp had been left in the relative safety of the fissure, since he was of no use in the current situation.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, and then broke into a sprint without having to say anything. Their goal was the end of the island beneath which the Black Turtle's enormous head was floating in the crimson water.

It was also where the Azure Serpent had broken through the Great Monster's silver armor and burrowed into its flesh, leaving behind a gaping wound. Since the scales of the creature were all but impervious, the meat could only be harvested from inside such a spot.

As they were nearing the point where the shell of the Black Turtle started to slope down at a steep angle, Sunny sighed and dismissed the Shroud of Dusk. Left in just his underwear, he ignored Neph's strange gaze and summoned the Nimble Catch and the Essence Pearl instead.

"...I've traded a couple of Memories just for such an occasion from the House of Night."

She lingered for a moment, then looked away.

"Oh."

While the Nimble Catch was weaving itself from the sparks of light, Sunny threw a glance at his body and frowned a little. He had always been lean, and while his muscles simply refused to gain bulk, they had been like taut steel wire cables ever since the Forgotten Shore.

Now, however, they had become a little bit too sculpted and defined. His abs were really like a washboard… which was not good at all. He had lost a lot of weight during the hellish journey through the Nightmare Desert and the days of hunger on the carcass of the Black Turtle. His body was all skin and muscle, with no fat left.

Which meant that it would start to devour itself next.

Some men strived for such a physique, but for Sunny, who had grown up in the outskirts, it was a worrying sign.

'We really need to get that meat.'

As the strange garb woven out of a fisherman's net covered his pale skin, he noticed that Nephis was giving him a sideways glance again, for some reason.

Slightly confused, he said:

"Summon that…"

But he did not have to say anything. The familiar golden rope was already manifesting in her hands.

They needed to dive into the tumultuous red water to harvest the monster's meat, but they didn't have to be stupid about it. If something happened, Sunny could swiftly pull them away through the shadows — however, finding a proper shadow to dive into was hard underwater.

And since the Great River was in the throes of the battle between the Azure Serpent and the monstrous butterfly, its current could easily pull Sunny and Nephis apart.

She threw him one end of the golden rope, and he hastily tied it around his left wrist while she tied the other end around her right.

At the same time, light swirled around Neph's slender legs and formed into two silver anklets. Sunny stared at them in confusion for a moment before realizing that their function had to be similar to the Nimble Catch.

He was a bit envious. Hers was not an armor-type Memory, so she did not have to dismiss the white tunic…

'Ah. I want to be sponsored by a guilt-ridden Saint too…'

Holding the black bow, Saint took a position that gave her a perfect view of the head of the dead monster and the seething water surrounding it. Her task was to protect… or at least try to protect them should either the serpent or the butterfly arrive.

Nightmare could not help her in case the former showed up, but if the latter did, his speed would have to assist Saint in leading the butterfly away. The amphora was placed beside them.

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other one last time, then dashed forward and simultaneously jumped.

The wind whistled in his ears. A few moments later, Sunny hit the crimson water and was instantly swallowed by it.

It was like he had dove into a sea of blood.

Everything around him was murky and red. Despite his best efforts, Sunny was momentarily disoriented, but regained his bearings after feeling a sharp tug on the golden rope. He found Neph through shadow sense, and followed her as she swam forward with purpose.

She had already done this once, after all. Granted… there had not been two Great Nightmare Creatures creating a storm nearby at that time…

'We need to be fast.'

Breathing with the help of the Essence Pearl, Sunny swam through the crimson waters of the Great River.

Chapter-1264: Gaping Wound

Guided by a golden rope that glowed faintly into the red murkiness, Sunny swam forward. The waters of the river of time, mixed with the crimson blood of a Great Monster, were cold and tumultuous. The battle of two harrowing abominations had turned them into a whirlpool of raging currents.

'Just how far is this wound…'

Suddenly, Sunny saw something enormous appear from the murky red darkness and shuddered. He was swimming past the giant eye of the titanic turtle, now hollow and devoid of light. His figure was like a speck of dust in front of it.

The Azure Serpent had long feasted on the Black Turtle's left eye, but the right still remained. Even though Sunny knew that the ancient behemoth was dead, he couldn't help but feel as if it was staring at him.

Looking away, he pushed himself through the water.

'We're not far from the creature's neck, then.'

Every second could be their last, so Sunny was tense. The battle of the dreadful abominations could shift in their direction at any moment. More than that… the Nimble Catch allowed him to swim with great speed, and Neph's silver anklets were the same. However, she did not seem to possess a Memory similar to the Essence Pearl, and had to hold her breath.

They simply couldn't linger.

Fortunately, the dark thoroughfare of the turtle's enormous neck emerged from the cloudy redness soon. It was encased in massive bands of tarnished silver, which overlapped to form a flexible, but

impenetrable armor.

Sunny caught up with Nephis as they followed the road of silver to the point where the monster's neck ended. There, its armor was torn apart and bent, sharp jagged edges surrounded by bloody foam. The stench of blood was much stronger here, and the water was much darker.

Nephis changed her direction, knowing where to go.

A dozen seconds later, they reached the gaping wound in the body of the Great Monster. Sunny froze for a moment.

'That…'

The Azure Serpent had not just ripped a chunk of flesh out of the Black Turtle's flesh, it actually burrowed inside like a hungry worm, tore through the insides of the monster, and then crawled out from a similar wound under one of the creature's flippers.

As a result, the wound in front of them was like a dark tunnel, not too different from the one through which he had guided the convoy of refugees in the Antarctica Center. The scale of it…

Was humbling.

'I actually said that I can kill that damned snake, didn't I?'

Nephis tugged on the rope to get his attention, then pointed forward.

Struggling against unexplainable fear, Sunny reluctantly pushed himself in that direction. At that moment, the entire corpse of the Black Turtle tilted, impacted by the shockwave of the terrifying clash between the Azure Serpent and the invading butterfly. It swayed slowly, and the dark tunnel of the harrowing wound started to move up.

By the time they reached it, half of the gaping, bloody hole was above the surface of the water, while the other half was still submerged in it. A red current was flowing out, trying to push them away. Sunny gritted his teeth and struggled against the flow, eventually entering the dark tunnel.

Then, however, the current was reversed, and a great amount of water flowed into the body of the dead monster, pulling them deeper inside.

'Crap!'

Sunny was carried into the depths of the Black Turtle's corpse with dire speed, slamming against its flesh and holding tightly to the golden rope. After what felt like an eternity, the current grew weak, and he managed to climb onto something solid.

Sunny pulled on the rope, and a second later, Nephis appeared from the water as well. She raised her hand, igniting a wisp of white flame on it to illuminate their surroundings.

He took a deep breath, suddenly realizing how close the two of them were standing.

After taking a bath in the diluted blood of the Black Turtle, both looked like a horror show… however, Sunny couldn't help but notice how tightly Neph's wet tunic stuck to her body, and how close to transparent the light fabric became.

He shifted slightly, then forcibly tore his gaze away and studied the dark tunnel of the Great Monster's bleeding flesh.

It looked… exactly like one would imagine such a place to look. Not that people had reasons to try and imagine something so morbidly bizarre.

The walls of the tunnel, which was mostly consumed by darkness, were uneven, spongy, and red. The lower half of it was covered by tumultuous water, while the upper half was filled with an almost unbearable stench of blood. Rivers of red were flowing from the walls and the ceiling, mixing with the dark water below.

Sunny and Nephis were standing on one of the vertebrae of the Black Turtle, which protruded from the bottom of the tunnel like a pale pink mountain. While he was looking around, she was breathing heavily.

"So, now…"

Before he could finish the sentence, the carcass of the Great Monster quaked once again, and the two of them were almost thrown off the slippery bone. Sunny had to grab Nephis to prevent her from plummeting back into the seething water.

A moment later, he realized that they were embracing, their bodies pressed tightly against each other. He could feel the softness and the heat of her skin through the thin fabric of the white tunic.

Her striking grey eyes were close… too close… as well.

Forgetting what he was going to say, Sunny remained motionless for a few moments.

Then, he made sure that Nephis had regained her balance and carefully let her go.

"So… now… all we have to do is carve some meat. Right?"

She cleared her throat, then raised the wisp of flame higher and looked away.

"Uh… uh... right. And return alive."

Sunny let out a shaky sigh.

'Sure. One thing at a time…'

Chapter-1265: Dirty Job

Sunny had to spend a few moments calming down his wildly beating heart. Then, he looked around once again.

The situation… was much better than he had expected it to be.

He really had not considered that the grotesque tunnel left behind by the Azure Serpent would be only partially drowned. Slicing through the flesh of a Great Monster was no easy task, and doing so underwater would have been even harder. More than that, he was less restricted in the use of Shadow Step now.

But, most importantly, he could summon the Covetous Coffer.

Opening the alloy chest underwater would have just resulted in the spatial storage being instantly filled with water. Now that they stood on a solid surface, things were different… of course, the tunnel could be flooded at any moment, so they had to hurry.

Sunny looked at Nephis and flashed her a smile.

"Let's be quick!"

The sparks of light swirled around them, manifesting into Memories. Neph's flame was replaced by a luminous paper lantern, and a sizable alloy chest appeared on the porous pink surface of the Great Monster's bone.

A moment later, their weapons manifested, t...

"Am I reduced to a mere butcher's cleaver? Ah… such humiliation…"

Sunny almost yelped when a familiar figure emerged from the darkness. The Sin of Solace looked somberly at his disheveled appearance, then shook his head. He was still clad in the Shroud of

Graceless Dusk, not to mention perfectly dry.

"Damn fool."

Sunny whispered a stifled curse and commanded the shadows to wrap themselves around the jade blade of the cursed sword, which had manifested itself a split second before. Then, he hissed:

"Gods, you almost gave me a heart attack."

Nephis froze for a moment and looked at him with a slightly startled expression.

"Oh… did I? Sorry…"

Sunny's eyes widened.

"No, not you! I wasn't talking… ah, never mind."

The Sin of Solace observed him with a small, disdainful smile.

"I must say. This is a peculiar location for a date. Harvesting monster meat from inside the monster… I hope you won't force the poor girl to cook the meal herself, at least?"

Struggling to ignore the bastard, Sunny threw the lid of the Covetous Coffer open and then moved closer to the wall of the flesh tunnel. Pushing down the feeling of disgust, he gritted his teeth and thrust the jian forward.

It was so strange. The taste of the Black Turtle's meat was truly sublime. But the source of it… was so… revolting...

'Damn it.'

One of the enchantments of the Sin of Solace made it incredibly sharp, and it had been augmented by the shadows on top of that. And yet, cutting into the flesh of the dead Great Monster felt like he was trying to cut stone with a rusty blade.

Sunny had known that harvesting the turtle's meat would not be easy, just from the fact that chewing it was a tough task. However, the

actual difficulty of trying to slice off a sizable chunk of the abomination's flesh was even greater than he had expected. Its durability in an uncooked state was simply preposterous.

'If that's hard, then how am I going to fight one of these things in the future?'

With no other choice, Sunny concentrated on the task. Taut muscles rolled under his skin as he put all his strength into it, and the jade blade cut deeper with excruciating slowness. Nephis was just as strained, using a sharp dagger instead of her longsword. Its blade was glowing with incandescent light, and her face was pale. Despite that, her progress was not much faster than his.

The dark island continued to sway and quake around them, making the water filling the morbid tunnel roll and slosh. Carving the meat was hard, and doing it while struggling to keep balance was especially hard. Nevertheless, they continued, sometimes using each other for support.

'This is taking too long…'

Sunny had hoped to fill the Covetous Coffer to the brim, but now he realized how unrealistic his lofty desires were. At this rate, it would be good if they managed to harvest enough to feed them for a few days. Of course, as long as the battle between the Azure Serpent and the eerie butterfly did not end or shift in their direction, there was still time.

And just as he threw the first chunk of meat into the maw of the alloy chest, the carcass of the Black Turtle quaked again. This time, however, there was something different about the tremor — instead of being pushed to the side, Sunny had almost been thrown up into the air.

Nephis and he abruptly stopped, looking at each other. Sunny's mouth was suddenly very dry.

"...They are below us now."

The whole plan was hinged on the fact that the massive bulk of the

Black Turtle would protect them from the two battling abominations. Now, the area of the battle was shifting, and the creatures were already below the dark island.

This meant that they were moving in the direction of the turtle's head.

Neph's eyes shone in the gloomy darkness as they reflected the glow of her scorching dagger. She lingered for a moment.

"What do you want to do?"

Sunny paused for a bit, then gritted his teeth.

"We've already taken the risk. Returning with empty hands would mean that it was all for nothing. We'll have to wait for a chance to do it all over again, and even if such a chance presents itself, we'll be much weaker by then. So… let's continue. I can pull us back through the shadows, anyway."

Nephis nodded in agreement, prompting them to return to the arduous task of carving the turtle's flesh. Both of them were much more tense now.

A few more slabs of meat fell into the Covetous Coffer, and at the same time, the shockwaves traveling through the island showed that the battling abominations were drawing closer to the creature's head.

Eventually, Sunny lowered his bloodied hands and grimaced.

"That's enough. It is too dangerous now."

Closing the lid of the alloy chest, he dismissed it and froze for a moment, concentrating his perception on the haughty shadow. He had left it with Saint and Nightmare, so it had a good view of the turbulent waters surrounding the Black Turtle's head.

…The water had been turbulent before, but now, it was simply boiling. Bloody foam was undulating like a stormy sea, and two enormous shadows could be seen far below, intertwined with each other.

They were just under the entrance to the gaping wound at the base of the titanic turtle's neck.

'Time to go.'

Grabbing Neph's hand, Sunny pulled the two of them into the shadow.

But...

Nothing happened.

The shadows remained ethereal and elusive, as if he had never possessed the ability to dive into their dark embrace.

Sunny froze, then slowly looked down.

He was still standing on the slippery pink bone.

Shadow Step had failed to activate.

Chapter-1266: Unexpected Complication

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?"

Two identical questions sounded at the same time, but they couldn't be more different. Neph's voice was tinged with a hint of sincere concern, while the voice of the sword wraith was full of biting mockery.

Sunny was motionless for a few moments, still holding Nephis by her hand. He shivered slightly after his second attempt to use Shadow Step failed, and she must have felt it.

He looked up at her and hesitated. When he spoke, his voice sounded hollow:

"My Ability… doesn't seem to work anymore."

An insidious fear suddenly drowned his heart, and at the same time, the dark island quaked again… the source of the tremor much closer than it had been before.

The fear was irrational and animalistic. It had little to do with their perilous situation, and more with that fact that his powers had abandoned him without a warning. It was as though he had suddenly found himself missing a limb. There was disbelief, confusion, dread… and, finally, terror.

It took all his willpower to push that terror down.

The Sin of Solace laughed.

Ignoring it, Sunny forced himself to speak:

"Just… just give me a moment."

He had no idea why Shadow Step, which had never failed him before, was suddenly ineffective. Perhaps something was wrong with the shadows populating the insides of the Black Turtle… if so, there was an easy way to check.

A few moments later, the Shadow Lantern appeared in his hand, and a flood of shadows flowed out of its open gate. However, the result was the same — it was not the shadows that were wrong, but Sunny himself.

"Ah… ah, really… such an idiot!"

The damned sword wraith was having the time of his life.

Sunny clenched his fists, then uttered through gritted teeth:

"I don't seem to be able to bring us away, at the moment. S—sorry…"

Nephis frowned, then carefully looked around. After a short pause, she suddenly said:

"In hindsight… it makes sense."

Feeling a sudden sense of hope, he raised an eyebrow.

"It does?"

She nodded.

"It is a Great Monster, after all, and we are inside its body. A creature like that would have protections against someone like you bypassing its fearsome armor by teleporting directly inside. The Black Turtle is dead, but some of its defenses must still remain… perhaps if the gap in power between us wasn't so vast, your Ability could have still tore through them."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"...Why didn't I think about that before?"

Nephis shook her head.

"I didn't, either. Don't bl… don't you think that blaming yourself is too much? We couldn't have known. We've never faced an enemy such as this."

She was right, but she was also wrong. Sunny might not have tried to enter the body of a colossal enemy through Shadow Step before, but he saw how the Azure Serpent had killed the Black Turtle. He could have at least considered the possibility of doing something similar…

In any case, everything seemed simple in hindsight. He winced, then looked at Nephis silently. As if reading his thoughts, she guided her flames from the blade of the incandescent dagger, through her body, and into his.

But the result was the same. Shadow Step was refusing to activate.

After feeling the warmth of Neph's flame leaving him, Sunny drew in a shaky breath and belatedly realized that he was still holding her hand.

...He was in no hurry to let go, finding it reassuring.

A deep frown appeared on Sunny's face as he looked in the direction of the entrance of the tunnel. Right now, the Azure Serpent and the Great Monster it was fighting were exceedingly close to the gaping wound, making the prospect of leaving the way they had come absolutely lethal.

What were their options, though? Staying here was tantamount to death, as well.

'Actually… there is a third option.'

Sunny turned around and looked into the depths of the tunnel, then pulled Nephis forward.

"Let's go. The entrance is blocked, but there's still the exit. The old snake burrowed right through, didn't it? The exit wound is on the

other side of the turtle's body, under its flipper. We'll escape through there and climb back onto the island."

That was the most rational decision he could make.

The two of them hesitated for a moment, and then dove back into the seething water. Shortening the length of the golden rope to keep them closer to each other, Sunny and Nephis swam through the diluted blood of the slain behemoth. Even though fighting against the current was incredibly hard, they moved further away from the harrowing battle with each stroke.

'Hurry… hurry…'

Sunny felt a dire urgency and pushed himself forward with as much strength as he could muster. The tunnel was not that long… the entire body of the Black Turtle spanned less than two kilometers, and the bloody path the Azure Serpent had burrowed through had to be half that. Of course, it was twisting and turning, and the chaotic movement of the water made it difficult to advance.

But still. They were going to reach the exit soon.

As they swam, they witnessed more signs of the destruction that the great river beast had wrecked, both when killing the Black Turtle and while feeding on its flesh later on. The walls of the tunnel sometimes expanded into vast caverns where the turtle's organs had been, now torn to pieces and completely obliterated. Pieces of bone and tough cartilage protruded from the darkness.

Sunny found it all both grotesque and strangely, darkly mesmerizing.

'I am swimming through a Great Monster. I feel like it's a dream…"

Well, it was. A Nightmare, to be precise.

Just as they passed the middle point of the tunnel and felt the current change, pulling them in the direction of their goal, he suddenly noticed something strange. Out there, a small distance in front of them… it was as though something was softly shining in the darkness. The glow was so faint that Sunny thought that he was mistaken, but the next time his head broke the surface, he saw it

again.

After hesitating for a moment, he suddenly pulled on the golden rope and pushed his tired body against the current once again, trying to make his way to the source of the strange glow.

Nephis and Sunny climbed onto a frayed piece of cartilage and looked at the wall of the tunnel. Out there, hidden in the folds of torn flesh…

He took a deep breath.

…Was an enormous, radiant crystal that shone with ethereal light.

It was one of the two Supreme soul shards that the death of the Black Turtle would have left behind.

Sunny briefly glanced at Nephis, then summoned the Covetous Coffer once more. The shard was too large to fit into the opening of the alloy chest, so he concentrated and changed it, keeping the shape but changing the size.

A few moments later, the alloy chest seemed more like an alloy sarcophagus fit for a giant… or someone like the shadowspawn.

'I can't believe it. We came down to harvest some meat, but ended up with something like that. Gods… I can't even imagine how much it would cost in the waking world. Actually, it wouldn't have a cost. These things are so rare that they can't be bought with money.'

Even though they were pressed for time, he just couldn't let this chance slip through his fingers.

"Neph… can you help me?"

Together, they hacked at the fold of the turtle's flesh to widen the opening, and then used all their strength to lift the massive soul shard and load it into the opened maw of the Covetous Coffer.

After that, they had to plunge into the water again.

Several torturous minutes later, Sunny and Nephis used the silver

chains at the side of the island to scale the slope of the Black Turtle's shell, and fell side by side on the rocks in exhaustion.

Knowing how Neph would look in her wet tunic, Sunny refused to turn his head and instead stared at the sky. The warm feeling of their arms touching was enough for him.

They needed to move… to hide… but he was too tired.

'Just a few moments...'

Sunny took a deep breath and tried to calm down a little. Then, he suddenly let out a low chuckle.

'Ah… but it's funny.'

After examining the Estuary Key, he had thought it impossible to collect one, let alone six Supreme soul shards. The idea itself seemed utterly preposterous.

And yet, here he was just a couple of weeks later, in possession of one. It had just fallen into his hands, almost on its own.

A strange shiver ran up his spine.

It was then that Nephis suddenly raised her hand and whispered.

"There…"

In the sky above the island, the monstrous butterfly was spreading its black wings once again.

Chapter-1267: Candlelight

Sunny and Nephis scrambled in an attempt to find a hiding spot… but there was no need.

Their first thought was that the dreadful butterfly had won the battle against the Azure Serpent. If that was the case, then their fates would be sealed. However, a moment later, a deafening roar shook the world, pushing them to the ground.

Turning to the stormy waters of the Great River, they saw a familiar creature rising to the surface.

The serpent was looking the worse for wear, with countless deep lacerations covering its mighty body. Streams of scarlet blood were flowing down its azure scales, and its giant eyes seemed even more deranged than usual. Flames of indescribable, murderous malice were burning in their cloudy depths — but, for once, that malice was not directed at the two humans.

Instead, it was aimed at the battered butterfly.

Now that Sunny and Nephis had a few moments to observe the Great Monster in detail, they noticed that it was in a sorry state, too. One of its six legs was missing, and there was an ugly tear on one of its beautiful wings. Its body looked strangely disheveled, and although none of the white scales covering it were missing, many of them were covered with thin cracks.

The Great Monster was retreating.

Sunny froze, momentarily stunned. Even though he had hoped that the Azure Serpent would win the battle against the much stronger Nightmare Creature, he could not quite believe that it actually happened.

'Old snake… just what damned kind of abomination are you?'

It was already miraculous for a Great Beast to defeat a Great Monster. Two of them, though? While not impossible, it was certainly abnormal. Even if the monstrous butterfly was an aerial creature, and was thus at a disadvantage while fighting underwater, the tenacity of the Azure Serpent was confounding.

Sunny stared at the bloodied leviathan somberly. As if sensing his gaze, the serpent lowered its snout and glared back at him.

Crimson water was flowing out of its slightly opened maw.

He shivered.

'...It's no mere Beast.'

Indeed, he should have known. His luck wasn't good enough to stumble on just any Great Beast. No, it surely had to be some kind of unique and singular existence… a damn monarch among all Beasts. [Fated] wouldn't have it any other way.

Maybe it was no coincidence that the Azure Serpent had come from much further upstream than the other two abominations.

'Ah, curse it.'

Sunny felt conflicted. On the one hand, he should be ecstatic about the fact that the harrowing butterfly was retreating. On the other hand, the ancient river serpent seemed much more dangerous now.

The butterfly, meanwhile, was swiftly rising higher and higher.

…However, it didn't leave.

Instead of disappearing into the distance, the Great Monster turned into a black dot once again and started to slowly circle the island from above. It looked like the creature was not giving up on the carcass of the Black Turtle, just recovering its strength and biding its time to make another attempt.

The Azure Serpent threw one last hateful glance at it, and then dove

into the water with an angry hiss. Soon, the island shook slightly, hinting that the abomination was devouring more of the turtle's meat, perhaps to restore its power.

The tumultuous water slowly calmed down.

Left in the sudden silence, Sunny and Nephis stared at the vast expanse of the Great River in exhaustion. After a while, he slowly exhaled.

"I guess… it seems we survived."

She nodded slowly.

"Yeah. I'll… I'll go find a deep pond."

Sunny blinked a couple of times

'Huh?'

What was she talking about?

"A pond? Why?"

He looked at her in confusion, prompting Nephis to sigh.

"...Why do you think? We just took a bath in a river of blood. I want to wash myself, of course."

Sunny tilted his head, only now realizing how nasty Nephis looked.

Well… he was no better.

A sly smile appeared on his lips. Suddenly feeling mischievous, Sunny asked:

"Can I join?"

She was already turning away.

"No. Go find your own pond… if you want."

He laughed.

"Wait, wait! What if I drown? Those fissures are very deep, you know!"

Nephis scoffed.

"If you do drown, maybe take the meat out of that storage Memory first. It will be sad if it just disappears, after everything we went through…"

Sunny watched her go. The silver anklets were singing a quiet melody as they bounced with each graceful step.

Eventually, he shook his head in dejection.

"Does she only care about the meat? How heartless…"

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Later that day, when the seven suns had already plunged into the water, Sunny and Nephis were back in their makeshift camp at the bottom of the deep fissure.

By now, it didn't look as desolate and barren as it had before. There was a fire pit assembled from the black rocks. The Shadow Chair and the Covetous Coffer, back to its usual size, were standing nearby. Neph's sleeping bag was laying on one side of the pit, while Sunny had gathered soft moss to serve as bedding on the other, using the Overpriced Saddle as a pillow.

Imp was sprawled on the ground, still digesting the huge amount of tarnished silver he had devoured. Saint was standing guard above, and Nightmare was hiding in the shadows.

Currently, the camp was illuminated by a softly glowing lantern, and a delicious fragrance of roasting meat was spreading through the air. Nephis was preparing a late supper over the coals. Not only that, but she had also gone all out, for some reason, using an inventive mix of spices to thoroughly marinate the meat before placing it above the glowing embers.

Both of them had washed the stench of blood off their bodies, and were now preparing for sleep, feeling refreshed. Before that,

however, they were going to finally satiate the gnawing hunger.

In that moment, the lethally dangerous trip into the carcass of the Black Turtle they had undertaken seemed well worth it.

Finally done, Nephis placed a generous chunk of meat on a plate and handed it to Sunny. In the last moment, though, she suddenly retracted her hand and hesitated.

"...Can you wait a moment?"

Sunny felt warm and relaxed, so he didn't mind waiting.

"Sure."

He watched her across the glowing embers with peaceful idleness. Nephis seemed to be looking for something. A few moments later, she found a splinter of the synthetic firebrick they had used to light the fire, and thrust it into the meat. Then, she touched it with the tip of her finger, and a wisp of white flame ignited at the top of the small stick.

Sunny received the strange dish with a confused look.

"Uh… what is this?"

A faint smile appeared on Neph's face.

"A candle."

He hesitated for a few moments, then scratched the back of his head.

"...Why?"

She leaned back and shrugged softly.

"I'm not quite sure how many days it has been since the start of the Nightmare. But… the battle happened at the end of November, and we spent around a week in the desert. So, it should be middle to late December now."

Sunny frowned.

"And?"

Nephis sighed and shook her head.

"It means that it has to be winter solstice back in the real world. It's your birthday, Sunny."

He stared at her in astonishment.

'Wait… she's right…'

Sunny had forgotten all about it. It was winter solstice, or at least close to it. Out there in the waking world, an army of Sleepers was entering the Dream Realm for the first time — if Antarctica still stood, that is.

It was also his birthday. He was turning twenty-one.

'Huh…'

He tilted his head a little.

'Twenty-one… I didn't really think I'd make it so far. Good job, Sunny.'

He looked at the burning stick, not noticing the bright smile that appeared on his lips.

Nephis leaned forward a little.

"If I were you, I would hurry up… and make a wish!"

'Wish? Wish, wish…'

Hidden by shadows, Sunny's smile grew brittle and strained.

Chapter-1268: Azure Serpent

There were a lot of things Sunny desperately wished for. However, the ominous words carved into a random piece of flotsam he had encountered by chance weighed heavily on his heart.

So, he held himself back and made a point of not wishing for anything.

'A pity…'

Sunny blew out the improvised candle and hungrily sunk his teeth into the juicy meat. The taste of it… was indescribable.

"Uh!"

'So delicious!'

Nephis had really outdone herself this time. To think that she could cook up something so tasty with so few ingredients… even the memories of the grotesque tunnel could not slow Sunny down. He attacked the roasted meat like a hungry wolf, annihilating it in no time. He still had to put some effort into chewing, but that only made the rich flavor and delightful texture last longer on his tongue.

Some time later, both Sunny and Nephis were pleasantly satiated and sprawled on the ground, looking very much like Imp. Sunny was very much relaxed and sleepy, as well as in a great mood.

Well, it was his birthday, after all. Surviving one more year was enough of a reason to celebrate, especially considering how many odious things he had lived through to get to today.

Plus, the Great Monster's meat, which Nephis had marinated and roasted over the coals, was truly sublime.

Come to think of it, she had silently assumed the role of the cohort cook from the moment they met on the Forgotten Shore. Whenever the cohort was together, Nephis was the one to feed everyone. The dishes she prepared were always filling, flavorful, and… just right. That was a strange talent of hers.

'Huh. Maybe I should hire her as chef when I open my restaurant…'

Sunny smiled. There was one thing slightly bothering him, though. A talent like this did not really fit her stern and knightly persona. How come Nephis knew how to cook? So splendidly, at that?

Sunny turned his head and looked at her.

"Hey, can I ask something? Why are you so good at cooking? Doesn't seem like something you would be passionate about..."

Of course, it didn't. Nephis was only passionate about one thing, and to such a startling degree that it left no room for any other passions.

She remained silent for a few moments.

"...Wilderness Survival."

He raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"Huh?"

Nephis shrugged.

"Did you think that children from the Legacy Clans are only taught how to swing swords? You studied Wilderness Survival at the Academy, so you must know how important survival skills are in the Dream Realm. Therefore, we learn to take care of ourselves in harsh conditions from childhood. Nutrition is an integral part of survival, and so it gets a lot of attention in the curriculum."

She paused before adding:

"At least that's how it was for me. Each clan has its own way of teaching its heirs, of course."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Makes sense… I should have guessed myself.'

He smiled.

"So, what you're saying is that you've been taking cooking classes since childhood?"

Hearing his words, Nephis frowned.

"Not… cooking classes! I've been taught both theoretical and practical skills concerning proper nutrition. It was a series of very thorough and elevated courses."

Sunny nodded a couple of times with a ponderous expression.

"Alright. I'm convinced. You're hired!"

She stared at him in confusion.

"You're hired… what? Are you talking to your sword again?"

Sunny vigorously shook his head.

"No… I'm talking to you…"

Nephis remained silent for a while, then let out a long sigh.

"Sometimes I really don't understand what you're saying."

He grinned.

"Don't worry. That makes two of us."

With that, Sunny laughed and turned away.

"Anyway. Goodnight, Neph."

There was a moment of silence, and then she dismissed the Memory lantern, plunging the deep fissure into darkness.

"Goodnight, Sunny."

…The carcass of an ancient behemoth floated on the currents of the Great River, and two humans slept peacefully in a crack in its shell.

***

Their lives slowly changed after the appearance of the dreadful butterfly… but, strangely, not by much.

Both Sunny and Nephis spent their days pretty much as they had before — they trained together, ate together, and rested on the soft moss together. Sometimes, Neph would go off to practice swordsmanship on her own, while Sunny would study the Estuary Key or sit motionlessly for hours, observing the Azure Serpent.

He could feel his technique slowly improving as the small imperfections left within its principles and application were tempered and refined. He could also feel his understanding of the Great Beast deepening bit by bit.

Only the Key of the Estuary remained a complete mystery.

By now, Sunny had a faint suspicion that its weave encompassed two separate patterns. One was hidden within the other, with its function aimed inside. The other was much more vast and complicated, with its function directed outside. Both were stunning, ingenious, and inseparably intertwined.

He had no idea what either of the patterns was supposed to do, though.

'Troublesome…'

When the tapestry of black strings started to blur in front of his tired eyes, Sunny would turn his attention back to the Azure Serpent.

The frenzied creature was not having a great time. It continued to devour the flesh of the Black Turtle day after day, waiting patiently for the opportunity to consume Sunny and Nephis. But, now, it had to contend with the monstrous butterfly, which was a harrowing adversary.

The butterfly descended from the sky on the third day after their first

battle, and then again on the sixth. Both times, the two great abominations fought to a bloody draw, and the winged horror chose to retreat.

Nephis hid in the fissure while the creatures were battling, but Sunny secretly stalked them from the shadows. Extending his shadow sense deep into the water, he followed the Azure Serpent as it furiously fought against the Great Monster.

Watching someone fight with their life on the line was the best way to truly get to know them, after all. Just these two battles pushed Sunny's understanding of the mad leviathan further than days of peaceful observation.

The Azure Serpent… was proud. And powerful. And absolutely insane. Its madness was even more terrifying than the sinister frenzy consuming the minds of all Nightmare Creatures.

It was also insidiously cunning and exceedingly lethal, possessing a frightening combat acumen that must have been honed by experiencing thousands of perilous battles.

This was why the great river serpent managed to send the more powerful creature retreating three times in a row.

…On the seventh day after their first battle, however, a new change shook the dark island.

Chapter-1269: Third Contender

This time, Nephis was the first to notice the anomaly. Sunny and she were resting after an exhausting spar — he was meditating with his eyes closed, while she was leaning her back on him, still catching her breath.

He sensed a sudden tensing of her muscles, and then the warm pressure was gone. Opening his eyes, Sunny glanced at Nephis and noticed that she was looking intently into the distance, where the endlessly flowing waters of the Great River were sparkling under the light of the seven suns.

The Azure Serpent was nowhere in sight, and the island was not trembling, which meant that it was circling the stone shell of the Black Turtle. The monstrous butterfly was a small black dot in the sky. What had caught her attention, then?

"What is it?"

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then pointed at a distant patch of water downstream of them.

"There. Can you see it?"

Following her gaze, Sunny studied the currents. After a while, a scowl appeared on his face, too.

"I can. But what are we looking at?"

There, still far away from the dark island, a span of the Great River seemed different from the rest of its vast expanse. From their position, it was no larger than a coin, which meant that the strange anomaly was thousands of meters wide.

It did not seem too threatening. The water surface was simply a bit

rough there, as if rippling under a strong gale. The problem was that such a gale would probably affect a larger area, not just a relatively small and strangely distinct patch of water.

A much bigger problem was that this patch seemed to be moving purposefully in their direction. Sunny wasn't sure at first, but after observing the river for a dozen seconds, he grew certain that it was no mere coincidence.

In these dozen seconds, the rough patch had already drawn visibly closer.

His face darkened.

"It has to be another abomination."

Nephis slowly nodded.

"I think so too."

For a few moments, both of them remained silent. It was only logical that a new Nightmare Creature would appear sooner or later — they had already met three, each of them harrowing in its own way. The arrival of the dark butterfly had also proven that the scent of Black Turtle's blood was like a lure for hungry abominations.

All they could do was wait and see if the approaching horror was of the kind that could climb onto the shell or not.

That was not the reason why Sunny felt somber, though. Rather, the appearance of the fourth threat had forced him to face an eventuality that seemed more and more like the truth.

That truth was that they would not be able to use the carcass of the Black Turtle as a ship to safely reach civilization, after all, no matter how much they had hoped that they would. It had seemed possible when there was only the Azure Serpent circling the island. The arrival of the dark butterfly made it questionable.

The appearance of the third contender was like a nail in the coffin of Sunny's hope. If there were three, there would be four, five, and more… sooner or later, one of the abominations would crawl onto

the shell, discover the two humans, and devour them.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

'...But what can we do?'

They couldn't escape by water, since it was populated by unthinkable horrors. They couldn't escape by air, either, since it was just as dangerous. Even though the carcass of the Black Turtle was slowly starting to seem more and more like a death trap, there was no way out.

He sighed.

"Let's just enjoy the show, for now. If I know anything about the old snake… it won't let the newcomer get close without a fight."

And indeed, no sooner than he said it, the crimson water foamed, and a gargantuan head of the great river serpent rose above its surface. This time, the creature's long snout was turned away from the island, facing downstream. The mad beast was watching the patch of rough water, too.

"What do you think it will be?"

Hearing the question, Nephis lingered for a moment.

"I don't know. It seems enormous, so… a whale? A cachalot? A giant squid, maybe?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I bet it'll be something entirely eerie, like that crawling mass of seaweed, bones, and rotten flesh that Cassie told us about on the Forgotten Shore."

He paused for a moment, and then added doubtfully:

"Also… what's a cachalot?"

Nephis let out a quiet sigh.

"...It's like a whale, but with teeth."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Did whales not have teeth? He knew what a whale was, in theory, but not the details. They were all extinct, anyway… probably.

Who knew what was happening in the oceans?

The two of them watched tensely as the patch of rough water drew nearer and nearer, revealing its true size. It was indeed several kilometers wide, and much more tumultuous than it had seemed from afar. The water inside the patch seemed to be boiling, which looked rather strange considering that the river around it was as calm as ever.

A minute later, the Azure Serpent let out an angry roar, and at the same moment, Sunny slowly rose to his feet.

'Curse it…'

The water… was not really boiling, and there was no titanic behemoth moving under its surface to cause the ripples.

Instead, there were thousands… perhaps even tens of thousands of small creatures moving forward at a terrifying speed, coming closer and closer to the island.

It had taken him so long to notice because their insect-like bodies were almost entirely translucent. Each was as long as his arm, with countless thin legs, beady black eyes, and long, disgusting mouths that were full of vicious, glass-like teeth.

Standing by his side, Nephis whispered:

"Krill…"

Sunny shifted his perception and shivered after noticing the vile darkness spreading through the bodies of the repulsive creatures. Each of them… was of the Corrupted Rank.

It was not another Great behemoth that had been attracted by the

scent of the Black Turtle's blood.

Instead, it was a swarm of thousands and thousands of abhorrent Corrupted Beasts.

Chapter-1270: Pinnacle of Strength

Even after living through the horrors of the Southern Campaign and witnessing the chilling resolution of the Battle of the Black Skull, Sunny still paled at the sight of the enormous swarm of Corrupted Beasts. There were too many of them to count, but there had to be tens of thousands of translucent crustaceans advancing toward the island.

Even Nephis seemed taken aback— a rare sight, and not a welcome one. She instinctively outstretched a hand, as if summoning a sword could save them from the plague of Corrupted abominations.

"It's… it's alright."

Her voice was even, but lacked confidence.

Sunny forced out a faint smile.

"How exactly is this alright?"

Nephis lingered for a moment.

"These creatures don't seem capable of leaving the water."

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

Yes, the abominable krill were probably incapable of crawling onto the island and devouring them. However, they were more than capable of devouring the Azure Serpent. And with the old snake gone, nothing would prevent the dark butterfly from landing on the shell of the slain Great Monster.

"That's right. You are going to die."

He flinched and glared at the Sin of Solace, who had appeared out of nowhere and looked at him with dark glee.

The sword wraith laughed, and then whispered:

"Better yet, you are going to watch Nephis die. Isn't it poetic?"

Sunny tried to ignore the vile apparition, but this time, it was much harder than usual. With the words of the Sin of Solace still echoing in his ears, he forced himself to look away and stare at the river.

Below them, the Azure Serpent lowered its head stubbornly, huffed, and suddenly shot toward the krill swarm with tremendous speed. The water parted and foamed where it passed.

Sunny could not see the Great Beast's eyes, but he knew that they were filled with bloodlust and fury. That snake… did not know when to retreat. Or rather, it never wanted to.

Its lust for slaughter and destruction seemed much greater than its desire to exist.

'...It's admirable, really. What an earnest beast.'

It took a special kind of lunatic to make a vice into a perverse virtue. The Azure Serpent's extreme bloodlust had made it into a much more fearsome existence than it should have been.

But how was it going to fight tens of thousands of Corrupted abominations? No matter how large its maw was and how sharp its fangs were, the serpent could only crush that many krill in its jaws. A dozen at a time, a few dozen, even a hundred… it was not going to make a difference.

For every bite it took, a thousand Corrupted creatures were going to sink their teeth into the Great Beast's flesh. Even though there was a vast gap between the two Ranks, it was not as insurmountable as that between the two Masters and the Azure Serpent.

It would have been different if the mad beast possessed unnatural powers, but it only possessed inconceivable physical might. Not all enemies, however, could be destroyed with pure strength.

And yet, and yet…

Sunny couldn't help but root for the great river serpent.

'Come on, old snake… do something!'

The swift figure of the azure leviathan was closing in on the rushing krill swarm, moments away from clashing with it. It seemed like a suicidal charge. It had to be…

And yet, it was not.

A second before the Azure Serpent plunged into the mass of translucent krill, it dove down. In the next moment, Sunny and Nephis swayed, pushed back by the shockwave of a demented, enraged roar. Even distorted by the mass of water, it was still loud enough to make their ears ring, and their bones vibrate.

The krill, however…

Since they had been much closer to the source of the roar, the shockwave spread through the swarm like a battering ram. Sunny's eyes widened when he noticed numerous translucent bodies suddenly convulsing and losing their speed.

The swarming abominations… were stunned.

Some of them, those who had been closer to the Azure Serpent, were paralyzed completely, while those that had been further away were at least disoriented.

Sunny concentrated and extended his shadow sense as far as he could, and then a little further still. He just barely managed to sense the massive shape of the Great Beast flying through the restless water.

That was why he sensed the mighty muscles of the serpent moving, his long body contracting like a bow. Then, its tail shot forward like a whip, and a sudden explosion sent countless tons of water rushing outward in a crushing wave. The sonic boom was even louder than the mad beast's enraged roar, and the force produced by it not only stunned the krill, but also tore many of them apart.

Many more were completely obliterated by the tail of the Azure Serpent.

…But incomparably more were already rushing from all sides, aiming to bite into its massive body.

The giant jaws opened and snapped, grinding a hundred krill into dust.

It was like a drop in the ocean.

Then, the serpent did something strange. It suddenly spun, as if trying to turn its long snout into a drill. Sunny did not see how this could help the Great Beast against the swarm of Corrupted abominations, but in the next moment, he opened his eyes wide.

Following the spinning motion of the leviathan, the waters of the Great River were stirred, forming a long whirlpool along the length of its colossal body. That underwater whirlpool was like liquid armor, the current powerful enough to repel the attacking krill.

The Azure Serpent's jaws opened again, and another roar shook the world.

When they closed, numerous translucent abominations died.

The battle was too furious, too grand, too inconceivable.

Standing on the shell of the dead behemoth, Sunny and Nephis watched in silence as a lone Great Beast resisted myriads of Corrupted creatures. Looking at the foaming water, they couldn't help but feel small… and weak.

And insignificant

'Unnatural… powers?'

Humans were bestowed with Aspect Abilities despite being mere Beasts, but Nightmare Creatures were different. Only Devils possessed dire powers similar to those of an Aspect. The Azure Serpent was not a Devil, and did not possess a sinister Ability.

However, it was not powerless.

Instead of relying on an unnatural power, it relied on its terrifying body, absolute control over it, and a deep understanding of its natural domain to make the river itself a power.

Sunny had been wrong. The Azure Serpent did possess a weapon to use against an enemy that could not be crushed through pure strength — that weapon was its mastery of water.

'This is it. I see now! I understand!'

He had spent countless hours trying to comprehend the Azure Serpent, but always felt that a crucial piece of the puzzle was missing. A fundamental truth that was at the root of all other insights, and without which they were meaningless.

Now, Sunny finally felt that he had found the thread which had to be pulled to unravel the mystery.

…Below them, the ancient leviathan was fighting against a harrowing swarm of abominable krill. The battle had only just begun, and there was no saying which side would win, and which side would be destroyed. The Azure Serpent possessed a dire weapon, but was that weapon enough to survive the onslaught of tens of thousands of Corrupted Beasts?

One way or the other, they were going to know soon.

Chapter-1271: The Krill

The battle between the Azure Serpent and the krill swarm did not last long, but it was the most terrifying event Sunny had seen since entering the Third Nightmare.

The Great Beast completely lost its mind as it fought the legion of vile abominations. Stirred by its fury, the water seethed and roiled, sometimes exploding into colossal fountains of scarlet foam, sometimes rising in titanic waves. The magnitude of these undulations was so severe that the whole island rocked and swayed like a ship caught in the middle of a world-ending storm.

The cacophony of wrathful roars and thunderous sonic booms merged into a deafening litany, to the point that both Sunny and Nephis were forced to plug their ears.

Thousands of attacking krill were destroyed… but the swarm did not seem diminished at all. Instead, no matter how furiously the Azure Serpent fought, more and more abominations were lunging at it, their thin legs moving in gluttonous anticipation.

At first, the water armor the leviathan had created protected its prodigious body, but eventually it failed. One krill struggled past the repelling current of the whirlpool, then two, then a hundred. Their teeth scraped powerlessly against the impenetrable azure scales…

However, after suffering through three dire battles with the Dark Butterfly, the Azure Serpent was battered and littered with wounds. Its body had already been covered by countless scars before, and now, there were numerous new ones. Some scales were broken, some cracked, and some were missing entirely.

It was only a matter of time before one of the krill managed to draw blood… then two, then a hundred. Even though their size was minuscule in comparison to the great river serpent, they were

Corrupted abominations nevertheless, and their painful bites added up.

The pain did not slow the Azure Serpent down, though. Instead, it became even more enraged, even more deranged, even more frenzied. The battle, which had already been frightening to look at, suddenly exploded in intensity, reaching a realm that went beyond fear.

Standing on the swaying shell of the Black Turtle, Sunny and Nephis watched the boiling river with pale faces. Before Sunny knew what was happening, he found himself holding Neph's hand… he did not know which one of them grasped the other's hand first, but felt that this simple touch was his only lifeline in a world that had lost all reason.

He also did not know how much time had passed.

All Sunny knew was that the battle… was changing.

The Azure Serpent did not manage to destroy the krill swarm. However, the swarm had also failed to consume the serpent.

But their goal was not the mad leviathan, in the first place.

The serpent was rampaging in the waters infested by the krill, but the swarm was simply too vast. Thousands of abominations at its edges simply rushed past the Great Beast and continued toward the carcass of the Black Turtle, their translucent bodies turning crimson as they dove into the cloudy red water.

Noticing that, the Azure Serpent let out an infuriated roar, but there was little it could do. The main mass of the swarm surrounded it like a cage, and no matter how forcefully it slammed into its shifting barrier, it couldn't break free.

Suddenly, Sunny felt a purifying warmth enter his body and soul. Looking down, he saw a soft glow rising from his skin, and glanced at Nephis with a silent question.

Her lips seemed dry.

"Bow… I think you should summon your bow."

He lingered for a moment, and then his eyes glinted darkly. Sparks of light ignited around his hand and formed into a black bow with a scarlet string. Then, an arrow that was like a bolt of lightning appeared out of nothing.

Drawing Morgan's Warbow, Sunny aimed at the seething mass of the approaching krill, and let the Strike of Thunder loose. The lightning flashed toward the crimson water and exploded, sending arcs of electricity flying across the surface of the river.

The monstrous krill were about the length of Sunny's arm, with carapaces so thin that they appeared transparent. Still, they were Corrupted Beasts, so their shells were tough enough to resist a direct hit from a railgun, and their teeth were sharp enough to tear through armored MWPs as if they were made from paper.

But Sunny and his bow were augmented both by the shadows and the soulflame, granting his arrow tremendous power. Which was why he soon heard a familiar voice whispering into his ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Beast, River Locust.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have slain a Corrupted Beast, River Locust.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have slain a Corrupted Beast, River Locust.]

[Your shadow grows stronger…]

Without stopping to listen to the Spell, Sunny sensed a flood of shadow fragments pouring into his soul and drew the string of the warbow again.

He did not hope to stop the advance of the krill swarm, and neither did he hope to help the Azure Serpent prevail. Even if Sunny killed a hundred abominations, he wouldn't be putting a tiny dent in the swarm.

Rather, what he was doing was pure opportunism. Nephis needed to burn the enemy with her flames or consume the soul shard like a normal Awakened to receive fragments, but Sunny just needed a kill. So, he could just as well use the opportunity to strengthen himself.

Sunny managed to fire off a few soul arrows and the Strike of Thunder once more before the krill reached the Black Turtle, reaping a rich harvest of lives.

Then, however, it became too dangerous to remain near the edge of the island — even though the revolting creatures could not crawl out of the water, they showed themselves capable of jumping out of it with enough force to propel their translucent bodies through the air.

After one of the krill landed a mere dozen or so meters away from them and scurried forward before being pierced by a black arrow, Sunny and Nephis decided to retreat.

Below them, thousands of Corrupted Beasts were fruitlessly trying to bite into the impregnable black scales of the dead behemoth. Some, however, were already swimming into the gaping wound under its flipper.

Further away, the Azure Serpent finally managed to break the cage of the greatly diminished swarm and shot through the water in pursuit.

It looked terribly mangled, bleeding from a thousand tiny bites. Some of the krill even seemed to have burrowed into the open wounds, just like the serpent itself had burrowed into the body of the Black Turtle before.

Despite that, the Great Beast seemed just as murderous and consumed by madness as ever.

'...The old snake did it. It actually... won?'

Even though many krill had managed to reach the carcass and swim inside, the swarm was undeniably broken.

The Azure Serpent — and the two humans it was hunting — were going to live another day.

Chapter-1272: Paradise Lost

That night, the island was quaking without pause.

Sunny and Nephis hid in their fissure, not daring to close their eyes — even though a mass of impregnable black rock separated them from the flesh of the Black Turtle, it was unnerving to know that thousands of Corrupted Beasts were currently slithering somewhere below them, shredding the meat of the Great Monster with their terrible glass-like teeth.

The Azure Serpent was also there, hunting down the invaders. Although they couldn't hear its roars, the violent vibrations spreading through the island told them what was going on.

Sunny looked away from the shimmering runes, somewhat startled at how easily he had earned a large amount of shadow fragments. After another violent tremor had shaken the island, he finally closed his eyes.

However, it was not to sleep.

Instead, Sunny tried to imagine… tried to convince himself that he was the Azure Serpent. He was crawling through the grotesque tunnel of bleeding flesh, which he himself had created to kill the hateful carapace monster, furiously hunting the vile creatures who dared to steal his trophy. His long, mighty body was burning from pain, but Sunny did not care.

All he cared about was slaughter, blood, and retribution.

Noticing a tiny worm gnawing on the wall of the tunnel, he let out a terrifying growl and shot forward, destroying the vermin and tearing a large chunk of meat out of the wall with his powerful jaws.

But, behind it, more vermin were revealed, stolen meat digesting in

their transparent stomachs.

With madness painting the cloudy world red, Sunny roared and slammed into them with obliterating fury.

'Is this the feeling? Am I on the right path?'

Opening his eyes, he stared into the darkness with an absent expression. Then, he looked at Nephis.

Some time later, Sunny said:

"I feel like our chances of making it off this island alive are dwindling."

She remained silent for a while.

"...So what if they are?"

White flames ignited in her eyes, illuminating them with a pale radiance.

"Has it been any different before?"

Hearing that, Sunny chuckled.

"True… we never had it easy."

He studied her face, then turned to look at the Sin of Solace and sighed.

"Still, I hope that this Nightmare will be better than my Second one. Oh, it's not much of a competition. I must have died a thousand times there… even though I only remember a handful of those deaths, the Third Nightmare surely can't turn out any worse than that."

Nephis turned and looked at him, then smiled faintly.

"Of course. In the worst case, we'll just die once. That's nothing, right?"

As the dark island shook and quaked around them, Sunny grinned.

"Dying once? Child's play! Gods, anyone can do it. You're right, I was worried about nothing."

As they laughed quietly, the Sin of Solace smiled, too.

His smile was bright and full of sinister amusement.

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The next day after the attack of the krill swarm, the butterfly descended from the skies again. And two days after that, another flying abomination appeared silently in the darkness of the night.

Neither Sunny nor Nephis saw it, but in the morning, the surface of the island was awash with black, fetid blood. It seemed that it was the butterfly that had battled the late contender this time, ripping it to shreds before it had the chance to approach the remains of the Black Turtle.

It must have taken an injury in that battle, because the Azure Serpent received more days than usual to recover from its dire wounds.

Then, as they drifted further downstream, a second krill swarm attacked, this one even larger than the first. The battle between the mad leviathan and the vast River Locust swarm lasted for an entire day, and its result was pretty much the same — thousands of translucent abominations slithered into the carcass of the Black Turtle, and the battered serpent followed to hunt them down.

However, what met it inside was another Great Beast — a vile creature made of numerous tentacles and spongy pale flesh — that had snuck to feast on the insides of the turtle while the river serpent had been fighting the krill.

Sunny and Nephis knew how it looked because the Azure Serpent brought its revolting body outside and rose high above the water before swallowing the corpse whole. That was how they learned why a powerful earthquake had suddenly thrown the world into spasms and convulsions before.

…On that day, to their horror, they discovered a deep crack snaking its way through the surface of the Black Turtle's shell. It was not too

large, but the fact that the stone carapace of the dead monster had been broken from the inside was indescribably concerning.

Next morning, Nephis went to the edge of the island instead of practicing with Sunny, as they usually did, and spent several hours staring at the water. Then, she brought back disturbing news.

The carcass of the Black Turtle… was higher than it had been before. The parts of it that had been hidden underwater were now dry and exposed.

This meant that a considerable amount of the dead behemoth's flesh had already been devoured by the Azure Serpent, the marauding krill, and the pale thief, thus reducing its weight and increasing its buoyancy. It was also the reason why the swaying and the shaking of the island had grown much more severe lately.

The carapace of the Black Turtle was deteriorating and cracking under the strain of harrowing battles raging around and inside of it, and at the same time, it was being gradually hollowed out by the Nightmare Creatures of the Great River.

Their titanic shelter was slowly coming undone under them.

Worse yet, in the coming days, the number of abominations arriving to feast on the corpse of the titanic monster only increased. There were more krill, more dwellers of the deep, and more winged horrors being lured to it by the scent of blood.

It was a carnival of horror.

The Azure Serpent and the Dark Butterfly were like champions among them, slaying all invaders and occasionally clashing with each other.

But that only made the situation worse.

Now, the dreadful inhabitants of the Great River were attracted not only by the blood of the Black Turtle, but also by the blood of unfortunate abominations that had been slain in their attempt to feast on the turtle's meat.

'This can't go on much longer… it just can't…'

Both Sunny and Nephis knew that doom was swiftly approaching.

However, there was nothing they could do.

No matter how much they hoped and how diligently they watched the horizon, there was no sign of anything that could save them.

There was no land and no ships anywhere in sight. There was not even a piece of flotsam drifting on the waves.

Only a vast, deep, and endlessly flowing expanse of water that shone under the dreamlike radiance of the seven beautiful suns.

Chapter-1273: Collapse

"Sunny! Wake up!"

Sunny opened his eyes and tensed. Sensing the world through the shadows, he couldn't feel any danger, but there was urgency in Neph's voice. Something was wrong.

As his mind entered a state of battle readiness, he pushed himself off the ground and briefly studied the fissure. It was still night, so everything was enveloped in deep darkness… that darkness, of course, could not hinder his sight. Sunny saw every detail of their small camp and of the weathered walls of black rock surrounding it.

Everything seemed fine.

Saint, who was guarding them from high above, was also calm.

He turned to Nephis and asked:

"What is going on?"

She pressed a finger against her lips and whispered:

"There was a sound."

The next moment, he heard it too. A dull, echoing crackle that came from somewhere below, spreading through the rock in a subtle vibration. Like a stone breaking.

He frowned.

'What is this…'

Sunny and Nephis froze, listening to the eerie sounds coming from within the carapace of the Black Turtle. They had not dared to venture there after salvaging the meat. The shell had been hollowed

out, but they didn't know by how much, and even though they had heard the sounds of Nightmare Creatures inside the carcass of the Great Monster from time to time, this crackling was entirely new.

A small whirlwind of sparks appeared in the air, manifesting into a softly glowing paper lantern. Placing it on the lid of the Covetous Coffer, Nephis lowered her head and pressed her ear to the ground.

There was another cracking sound, and she suddenly flinched.

At the same time, Sunny's pupils narrowed as he noticed something that was out of place in their fissure.

A small, thin crack appeared on the floor of the ravine. Just as Neph flinched, it suddenly grew, spreading through the black rock in both directions.

Then, it climbed a few meters up the wall, and when the cracking noise disappeared, a small piece of rock splintered and tumbled down.

Neph's face suddenly grew pale.

"I think it's going to brea…"

Before she could finish, there was another sound, this one so loud that it was almost deafening. Sunny felt the ground suddenly shift under him, and then the entire island shook violently.

"It's breaking!"

Before he even knew what was happening, Sunny jumped. As Nephis and he soared into the air, the floor of the fissure below them suddenly split and collapsed, revealing a vast cavern of darkness and crimson flesh below.

Their small camp was instantly swallowed. Except for the Memories like the Coffer that were dismissed and disappeared in a whirlwind of sparks, everything else — the fire pit, the sleeping bag, the bed made of soft moss, and the rest of it — fell into the darkness in a rain of stone shards.

But the collapse was not over yet.

As Sunny collided against the vertical wall of the fissure and grabbed onto the rocks, the walls tilted, too. A horrible stench of blood entered his nostrils, and he saw the small crack he had noticed before expanding. Countless new ones appeared, as well, and the entire ravine suddenly moved.

'Goddammit!'

Struggling to outrun the disaster, Sunny pushed himself off the wall and jumped higher. He was aiming to repeat the process and send himself to the surface with the next jump, but the spot that he was aiming for suddenly broke off and plummeted down in an avalanche of stone. Cursing, Sunny manifested the shadows to create a foothold instead.

A split second later, he flew out of the fissure, rolled on the ground, then dashed back to its edge and grabbed Neph's hand, helping her climb out.

As soon as they rolled away in a heap, the entire edge split off and crumbled down.

A panicked thought that the entire island was falling apart entered Sunny's mind.

However, the devastation was not as absolute.

As the two of them watched, the landscape of the Black Turtle's shell was changing. It seemed that the schism originated from the location below the central region, where their camp had been located. Wide cracks spread through the black stone, and a wide surface either crumbled entirely or at least sank, forming deep craters.

The rest of the island was affected, too, but to a smaller degree. It was just a chain reaction that forced the ground to tilt and slide into the water by a few meters.

Nevertheless, their shelter was still afloat.

Sunny belatedly realized that he was practically laying on Nephis.

Their limbs were entangled, and both of them were covered in stone dust. Struggling to breathe, he slowly pushed himself away and stood up. A couple moments later, she followed.

Standing dazedly above the newly formed pit, Sunny and Nephis looked down with bleak faces.

Their camp, where they had spent so many peaceful nights, was gone.

Much worse, the dark island was showing signs of breaking apart. It was just a part of the central region today, but there would be more collapses in the future. Eventually, the entire shell would crumble, leaving them stranded and lost in the sea of deadly abominations.

After almost a month of peace, they finally reached a true crisis.

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

Eventually, he broke the silence:

"We need to get off this island."

Nephis lingered for a moment.

"Yes. But how?"

Sunny looked away with a dark expression. He didn't know. It was not as if they had not been preparing for this inevitable situation — they had tried to come up with a feasible plan dozens of times.

However, there was no such plan to come up with.

The Azure Serpent was still waiting for them in the water, and the Dark Butterfly was still ruling over the sky. Worse than that, many more abominations were prowling the surrounding waters, including the harrowing swarms of krill.

If the island sank, they were going to die.

If it didn't sink, the Azure Serpent would eventually be killed, and they would be devoured by either the monstrous butterfly or some

other Great Nightmare Creature.

There seemed to be no escape.

Staring into the pit filled with stone rubble, Sunny sighed.

'Now… now, it finally feels like a real Nightmare.'

A sad smile appeared on his pale face.

Chapter-1274: Time of Truth

The seven suns were shining in the azure sky.

Sunny was sitting close to the slope of the island, staring fixedly at the flowing water. His eyes were dark and tired. With the temporary camp destroyed, he felt strangely homeless. Much worse, neither he nor Nephis had managed to come up with a viable solution for their fatal problem.

They had considered many things.

Every Memory in their possession had been studied and examined, but none of them, nor any combination of them, revealed a way out of the perilous situation. The best they could hope for was prolonging their stay on the carapace of the Black Turtle, somewhat.

They could use the Dark Shaper to try and repair the cracks in the stone shell. There were other unreliable measures, as well… but that would just buy them a few more days, at most.

There were other Memories that they could use to try to escape. But attempting escape was tantamount to suicide. The Great Nightmare Creatures guarding both the water and the sky were not something they could outrun.

…Then, there were Sunny's Shadows.

He had once thought that Saint was their best hope of slaying the Azure Serpent. However, after witnessing the mad beast in battle, he didn't think that the taciturn knight could achieve such a feat anymore. Not only because she could not enter the water, but also because his plan to augment her with both the shadows and the white flames had been crushed.

Saint… could not receive the blessing of the fire. Or rather, she could

not reap its full benefits.

The augmentation had worked perfectly fine in his basement before the Southern Campaign, but Saint underwent a fundamental transformation after that. She was now a Devil whose body and soul were infused with elemental darkness. And while true darkness somehow worked in tandem with Sunny's shadows, it refused to accept Neph's light.

Saint could either use one or the other. In any case, the result was not nearly as powerful as Sunny had imagined it to be.

They could bestow the power of shadow flame on his other Transcendent Devil, though. Sadly, Imp was not nearly as formidable of a warrior as Saint. On top of that… the little bastard was in a coma.

Or a food coma, at least.

The scrawny goblin had finally stopped devouring the tarnished silver and fell into a deep slumber. Sunny had a hunch that after the great mass of mystical metal was fully digested, his gluttonous fiend would grow much stronger. But there was no telling how long it would take, so he sent Imp into the nurturing black flames of his soul to complete the evolution in peace.

In any case, Imp was of no help for now.

The same went for Nightmare. The tenebrous steed had loyally guarded their dreams and subjugated a good number of them, but he was still an Awakened Terror. Even if the black stallion managed to unlock his Terror Ability, he was no match for a Great Beast… let alone a Great Monster like the Dark Butterfly.

So, Sunny and Nephs had no tools that could help them escape from the shell of the Black Turtle.

…Which was why Sunny was sitting on the cold stones and staring aimlessly at the water.

The water… was much less cloudy than it had been before. The vivid red color had receded, turning pale pink. The Black Turtle only had

so much blood, after all, and by now, most of it had dissolved in the endless current of the Great River.

As he looked, the water suddenly foamed, and a giant serpentine head rose from its depths. A familiar gaze pierced him, brimming with hatred and madness.

The Azure Serpent… did not look too good. Just like the carcass of the Black Turtle, which had once seemed grand and indestructible, was now pitiful and hollow, the Great Beast was in a dire state.

One of its cloudy eyes was gone, replaced by a bloody hole. Half of the terrifying fangs in its obliterating maw were either cracked or broken. Whole chunks of flesh were missing from its long neck, revealing red meat and white bone.

And yet… the Azure Serpent was undeterred. It was just the same. Its fury was the same, its hunger was the same, and its mad determination to kill the two humans was the same.

The Great Beast stared at Sunny, and Sunny stared at the Great Beast.

"Aren't you a persistent one?"

His voice sounded grim and hoarse.

Sunny remained silent for a while, then suddenly spat:

"But what do you even know? Do you think you're so special? I know fury, too. I know hunger, too. I know madness, too! Oh… and I've killed plenty of creatures more powerful than me, too."

A dark smile appeared on his face.

"Who are you to dare stare me down, beast? I am Lost from Light, who was born from the shadows. I am the rightful heir of death and the bastard son of fate. Wherever I go, ruin follows. If you had any sense, you would have run away as soon as you saw me."

He shivered slightly, then sighed.

"Ah… but it's too late now. What a pity."

Standing behind him, the Sin of Solace laughed with disdain.

"Wow. What a speech! What are you, an eighth-grader?"

Ignoring the apparition, Sunny looked away and stood up.

There was only one way to leave the island. He had known it for a long time, but felt reluctant to admit it.

However, there was no time to lie to himself anymore. Now, it was the time for the truth, no matter how hideous and terrifying it was.

Walking through the crumbling landscape of the dark island, Sunny found Nephis. Despite everything, she was still practicing with her sword… the lethal blade, and its master, were both beautiful.

The world of the Great River was lethal and beautiful, too.

Sensing his approach, Nephis stopped and glanced at him with a composed expression. Sunny took a deep breath before coming to stand next to her, looking into her eyes.

"I have something to say."

She nodded slowly.

"What is it?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then offered her his hand.

"Give me your flame. All of it."

Nephis frowned slightly, a hint of concern appearing in her striking grey eyes.

"Why?"

He looked at her silently for a while, thinking.

Sunny had told the old snake that ruin followed wherever he went. But, really, he was the one following ruin around most of the time. The two of them followed each other, unable to separate, just like a shadow and a star casting it could not be separated.

They were quite a pitiful pair.

Eventually, he steeled his resolve.

"Because I am going to kill the Azure Serpent."

Chapter-1275: Last Resort

Everything that needed to be said had already been said. Everything that needed to be done had already been done.

Granted, there was not much to these preparations.

Sunny and Nephis were in a desperate situation, and they could only escape it by resorting to desperate means. This was going to be it. They were either going to live, or die.

Sunny looked at the weathered surface of the Black Turtle's shell as they walked to the shore. The black rock, the green moss, the deep fissures with murky water glistening in some of them… he had spent the first month of the Nightmare here.

It was a harrowing place — or rather, it was supposed to be harrowing. But, strangely, all he could remember about the dark island were happy memories.

Training with Nephis until sweat covered their bodies and a pleasant fatigue settled in their muscles. Laying on the moss and staring at the dreamlike sky, unbothered by the movements of the world. Eating delicious meals and drinking cool, sweet water. Bathing in the warmth of a campfire as they talked to each other, surrounded by darkness.

All of that was coming to an end. It already had.

He… was reluctant to let go of this harrowing paradise.

But there was no other choice.

'Maybe I truly am mad.'

Sunny had entered the Nightmare utterly crushed. From Falcon Scott

to the Battle of the Black Skull, he had tasted nothing but bitter failure. He had wished to be strong. He had made this wish come true, only to find out that it was of no use in the end.

As if to mock him, fate had obliterated everything.

However… somehow… he had truly been content on the dark island. Sailing through a river of unholy blood on the corpse of a dreadful monster, being pulled into the past by the current — he had been happy on that journey, and happier still to share it with someone he... was fond of. Was fond of so much.

He had been having fun in the depths of a nightmare.

'...So what if I'm mad?'

He would need madness to survive today.

The three of them — Sunny, and Nephis, and Saint — reached the slope of the island. Below them, the Great River was flowing endlessly, bleak because of the encroaching night.

The darkest hour — the brief time after the suns had already plunged into the river but before the vast expanse of clear water started to glow with soft radiance — was swiftly approaching.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'Calm down. You've prepared for this… you've been preparing this whole time.'

Indeed, Sunny had not spent the whole month simply relaxing and spending idle time with Nephis. He had always known that this unexpected respite was not meant to last. And so, he had been studying the Azure Serpent.

By now, Sunny knew the mad beast much better than he knew most people. He had learned everything about it — how the serpent fought, how the serpent thought. What emotions guided it, what dark passion burned in its vile, corrupted soul.

He also learned how the creature's colossal body moved and worked,

down to the smallest detail, as well as how the great river serpent commanded water to turn it into a weapon. In that regard, Sunny's experience fighting side by side with the scions of the House of Night had been of great help.

After coming to learn all these things… Sunny knew for a fact that he would never be able to defeat the Azure Serpent in a battle.

But…

That was if the Azure Serpent was healthy and whole.

It was not anymore.

The Great Beast had been ravaged by the battles with the Dark Butterfly, the harrowing assaults of the krill swarms, and the insidious attacks of the marauding abominations. Its flesh was shredded and frayed, its strength was exhausted, and its mind was clouded by rampant madness.

So, maybe… just maybe… Sunny stood a chance of emerging victorious from the fight.

If he won, they would have to leave the dark island immediately and never look back. Otherwise, the monstrous butterfly was going to descend from the dark sky, notice them, and devour them.

If he lost, he would die.

…At least he would die first, turning the words the Sin of Solace had whispered once into a lie.

'I'm ready.'

With a sigh, Sunny turned to Nephis and offered her a faint smile. He lingered for a few moments, then said evenly:

"The next one is on you."

She nodded seriously, completely missing the humorous undertone.

"Of course."

Sunny shook his head, then took her hand, transferring the Essence Pearl from his soul into hers.

"I was joking, you know?"

Nephis lingered for a moment. Suddenly, she gripped his hand tighter and looked him straight in the eyes.

"...I wasn't."

He held her gaze for several long, poignant seconds before freeing his hand with a sigh. Then, Sunny glanced at Saint.

"You know what to do."

The graceful knight raised her bow with indifferent grace. She had to play an important part in the battle, too — Nephis might not have been able to augment her with the white flames, but Saint had been wearing the Stifled Scream for an entire month.

Better yet, just as Sunny had thought, sailing on the Great River had a strange effect on the Transcendent charm. By now, the enhancement it gifted to the taciturn Shadow was much greater than it was supposed to be. Even without the augmentation of the shadow flame, she was frighteningly powerful.

Finally, Sunny looked back at Nephis.

"Do it."

He felt the purifying warmth flowing into his body and soul, strengthening both. At the same time, all five of his shadows wrapped themselves around him. In an instant, Sunny felt strong enough to crush the black rocks with his bare fists, and shake the entire world with his steps.

Turning to the Great River, he took a deep breath and whispered.

"Lost from Light. Remember. This is your name…"

Then, he opened the gate of the Shadow Lantern and allowed a flood of shadows to flow out of it, drowning the slopes of the island. They

flowed down like an avalanche of darkness, eventually touching the water.

Sunny closed his eyes and dissolved into the shadows.

...In the next moment, the shadows moved, and something tore free from their dark embrace.

A giant serpent with scales as black as onyx manifested itself from the darkness and dove into the water with a deafening roar.

Chapter-1276: Dance of Monsters

Sunny was ready for battle.

Now… he wasn't Sunny anymore.

He was a mighty serpent, clad in an armor of onyx scales, with fangs as sharp as diamonds and enough fury to incinerate the world.

But that was not enough.

Following his wrathful roar, the Shell hiding below his scales turned into the adamantine Mantle. A fearsome obsidian armor encased his flexible body, light as a feather and crafted so intricately as not to restrict his movement in any way.

The water exploded into the air when he dove into the depths… the depths that belonged to him, and him alone.

"OLD SNAKE!"

The call escaped his monstrous maw, turned into a senseless roar.

…What he had done was simple, but also indescribably hard.

He had dove deeper into Shadow Dance than ever before, mirroring both the mind and the physique of a Nightmare Creature. He had not been sure that it would be possible until the last moment, but his meticulous preparation paid off.

It was do or die, nothing less.

He had spent countless hours observing the Azure Serpent and learning everything there was to learn about it. Then, he dissolved into the shadows, and manifested himself back into a tangible form.

Finally, he summoned the dead shadow of the Black Turtle, which he had lured into the Lantern, to form a mighty shell around his fragile incarnation.

But, for the first time, the shape of his shell was not that of the shadow fiend. Instead, it was the shape of a monstrous river serpent… the shape of the mad beast whom he feared, admired, and wanted to kill.

Of course, this Shadow Shell could not compare to the real thing. He was only an Ascended, after all, while the Azure Serpent was a Great Beast. It was weaker, less resilient, and smaller — maybe a quarter of the size of the actual abomination.

However, it was suffused with the power of both shadows and soul flame, granting it power well beyond the limits of what an Ascended could possess.

It was also protected by the Mantle, and made to reign the depths.

Only… there was another challenging his reign.

A maddening fury consumed his mind, and he shot forward through the water like a black spear. He could feel it… the scent of blood spilling from the mangled body of the older, stronger beast.

So what if it was older? So what if it was stronger?

It would be torn apart by his fangs, anyway.

The Azure Serpent had felt him, too.

He sensed a vast shadow rising from below to meet him. It was brimming with harrowing power and terrifying madness…

But he was not afraid.

He didn't know how to be afraid.

All he knew was wrath and bloodlust.

The two of them — a colossal serpent covered in beautiful azure

scales and a smaller serpent encased in obsidian armor, wreathed in shadows and blinding white radiance — collided in the water, causing gargantuan waves to rise on the surface of the Great River.

Their first collision would have been his last if he had not twisted his body at the last moment, evading the Azure Serpents deadly maw and diving under its belly.

He had to remind himself…

That he was Lost from Light.

He was not a mindless Nightmare Creature. He was not a Beast. He was cunning, resourceful, and skilled. He possessed the honed battle sense of a masterful warrior and the powerful soul of a Tyrant.

It was a strange thing, to both believe that he was a serpent with all his heart and know that he was something else. Losing himself in the dance was just too easy… but his True Name was like a beacon that guided him home.

He… Sunny… understood that he had to remember himself if he wanted to survive. His current form was immensely powerful — no less powerful than a Saint's Transcendent form would have been, perhaps. He could feel the barriers that had been preventing him from mastering the fourth step of Shadow Dance breaking. He could feel his boundless, bestial strength.

But, in front of the Azure Serpent, that strength was almost laughable. Despite the terrible wounds covering the body of the Great Beast, it was still infinitely more powerful than his.

Which was why he had to be devious, cunning, and sober if he wanted to kill his enemy.

He had to be deranged and overcome by fury, too.

...He had to guide his mad fury and sharpen it into a cold and merciless blade.

Sunny twisted his serpentine body, dodging the maw of the ancient abomination, and sunk his fangs into an open wound on the Azure

Serpent's neck. It was only for a moment, though — giving up on tearing out a chunk of flesh, he let go and darted upward a split second later.

It was just in time, because the leviathan's jaws snapped closed just a meter behind him in the next moment.

The two of them clashed furiously as they ascended from the depths. The Azure Serpent was much larger, more powerful, and terrifyingly domineering. The black serpent was smaller and more nimble, circling around the dreadful beast and delivering vicious bites one after another.

However, even without being caught in the leviathan's jaws, Sunny was suffering tremendous harm.

As their bodies brushed against each other, a vast stretch of the Mantle cracked and shattered. The shadows below rippled, the internal structure of the shell twisting and breaking apart. The violent currents created by the passing of the Azure Serpent's body were slowing him down, and his dark flesh was sliced open by the creature's dorsal fin.

His shell was bleeding shadows.

His essence was being burned.

His mind was drowning in pain and derangement.

'More! More! More!'

Despite knowing that it would cost him his life, Sunny felt compelled to bite into the enemy's flesh and never let go, to hurt the foe as much as he could, even if it meant death.

To rip apart. To devour. To destroy.

…Instead, he continued to dodge the attacks of the Azure Serpent with clarity and skill, all the while attacking with hatred and fury when he could .

And, all along, he was leading the Great Beast upward.

Finally, they broke the surface and clashed again above the water. The suns were gone, and the river had not started glowing yet.

The shaking world was dark.

With a stifled roar, Sunny dodged the fangs of the Azure Serpent and tried to bite into an open wound on its mangled body, where white bone could be seen. However, before he could, the mad beast's tail crashed into him like an obliterating ram, sending fragments of the Mantle flying through the air and a blinding flash of pain piercing in his soul.

'Argh!'

Sunny fell heavily into the water, and a tall fountain of white foam rose into the sky.

The Azure Serpent let out a demented growl and lunged at him, aiming to bite the hateful worm in half.

…Before he could, however, two arrows — one black, one white — fell from the darkness and pierced its flesh

Saint and Nephis had joined the battle.

Chapter-1277: Fourth Step

Sunny had suffered to lure the Azure Serpent to the surface, but there was a good reason to guide the mad beast there. Two reasons, even — Saint and Nephis.

Although neither of them were as capable of fighting the abomination in the water as Sunny was, they could still play an important role in the battle. It was just that he had to create an opportunity for them to do so.

And he had.

As Sunny was convulsing from pain, two arrows struck the raging leviathan.

One was entirely black, as if forged out of pure darkness… which it was. Augmented both by her [Mantle of Darkness] and [Blade of Darkness] Abilities, as well as the enhancement of the Stifled Scream, Saint's arrow pierced the Azure Serpent's one remaining eye.

It was the darkest hour of the night, and so her strength was at its peak. More than that, this first shot she sent was empowered by the dreadful destructiveness of the [Death Dealer] enchantment, and so it delivered the most damage.

And yet… the giant eye of the ancient leviathan still wasn't destroyed. It was only damaged, becoming painted red — which made the mad beast look even more menacing.

Sunny had put a lot of hope into this first salvo, but he was left disappointed. It didn't matter, though. During their violent ascent, he had been strategically trying to place himself on the side of the Azure Serpent where it was blind… however, there was no advantage to be gained there. Whatever senses the enemy was using to perceive his movements were perfect and precise, even without vision.

His plan to blind the mad beast had been meaningless from the start.

…The second arrow was white. Its impact was not nearly as forceful as that of the first arrow, but it was still quite ferocious.

Nephis had always used a sword, but it was simply a preference. As a Legacy, she had been trained in the use of all kinds of weapons, and that certainly included bows. There was a powerful Memory longbow in her soul arsenal, crafted by the forgemasters of Valor, and several enchanted arrows as well.

But even then, the white arrow barely managed to pierce the flesh of the Azure Serpent despite sliding faithfully into an already existing wound, where the azure scales and the tough skin of the leviathan had already been torn open by the Dark Butterfly. The damage was negligible.

That was just as expected, too. Neph's goal was not to wound the Great Beast with her arrows — instead, it was to deliver the black venom from the overflowing Bitter Cusp into its flesh. She coated the arrowheads with the toxin before each shot.

One dose of the black venom was not going to affect the Azure Serpent much, but ten, twenty, or thirty could weaken it… perhaps.

Sunny did not expect Saint and Nephis to bring the mad beast down. After all, all five shadows and all the soul flame were augmenting him, and him alone — he was the only one with the ability to truly damage the abomination. But they had to harass and weaken it so that he could deliver a fatal strike.

It seemed to be working.

The two arrows had not seriously wounded the Azure Serpent, but they had distracted it for a second. That second was enough for Sunny to shake off the terrible pain of having his soul damaged and slightly repair his shell. Letting out a wrathful hiss, he shot forward and bit into the side of the leviathan.

Even though the Shadow Shell had no taste buds, he could swear that he sensed the salty taste of blood on his tongue.

That taste drove him into a frenzy.

'Devour… I am going to devour you… I am going to rip you apart!'

Forgetting the pain, forgetting the suffering, Sunny pressed his mighty jaws together in an attempt to savage and mutilate his enemy. It was only through an incredible effort that he forced himself to maintain control and let go, dashing aside just in time to avoid being trapped and crushed in the coils of the Azure Serpent's colossal body.

A drop of cold fear fell into the incinerating inferno of his fury.

'This is dangerous…'

Battling a Great Beast was already perilous enough. But the act of assuming the shape and form of a Nightmare Creature, of diving into its mind and heart so deeply, was in and of itself a great danger. Sunny had used Shadow Dance to read abominations before, but he had never tried to manifest himself into one of them.

It was too easy to get lost in that state — maybe forever. Even the True Name was not a panacea. He also had to maintain his sense of self... while simultaneously denying it.

Maybe this… this was the fourth step of Shadow Dance. The ability to preserve his identity while becoming truly formless in mind, body, and soul — and thus infinitely malleable, like all shadows were.

As Sunny nimbly dodged the attacks of the Azure Serpent and lashed out with his sharp fangs and crushing tail, more arrows fell from the darkness. Saint was not using [Death Dealer] anymore, instead trying to weigh the leviathan down with the help of [Burden of Peace]. Nephis was continuing to poison the Great Beast with the toxin of the Bitter Cusp.

However, the abomination had quickly grown impatient with their harassment. Its movements changed slightly, and the next time the two shot their bows, a tall wave suddenly rose, washing the arrows away.

That gave Sunny an opportunity to deliver a vicious blow, however.

Coiling himself around a mangled span of the Azure Serpent's body, he slithered forward. His sharp dorsal fin bit into the mad beast's flesh, shredding it like a saw.

The soft glow of the brightening water was suddenly painted in a crimson hue.

'Die, die, die… I am going to kill you…'

The Azure Serpent growled and lunged at him, madness burning in its bleeding eye.

It was probably thinking the same.

Chapter-1278: Mutual Destruction

The Great River was foaming and seething, gargantuan waves rising from its softly glowing expanse to crash into the weathered slopes of the crumbling island. Two dark silhouettes — one colossal, the other merely giant — were moving through the raging water, intertwined in a murderous battle.

Sunny had been driven mad by pain and bloodlust.

He lost count of the number of blows his obsidian, serpentine body had endured. He also did not know how many times he retaliated, biting the flesh and breaking the scales of the Azure Serpent.

His Mantle was in shambles, the [Living Stone] failing miserably to keep up with the barrage of devastating attacks he had to endure. The fearsome onyx armor was cracked and shattered, revealing the glossy black scales beneath. Many of its segments were entirely destroyed.

The Shadow Shell that it was encasing had been shredded and ravaged, as well. Giant wounds were gaping on it, bleeding shadows. He had been able to repair some of the damage at first, but having the means to do something like that… it seemed so distant now…

There was one thing that filled Sunny with dark glee, though.

It was that the Azure Serpent looked no better than him.

The body of the Great Beast had already been grotesquely mangled before their battle, and now, it was in an even worse state.

The wounds that had closed were reopened. The wounds that had been opened were now wider and more harrowing, with crimson

blood flowing out of them into the radiant water. Dozens of arrows were sticking out of the abomination's scarlet flesh. Some of them weighed it down, some sent a deadly toxin circulating through its bloodstream.

But the Azure Serpent's eyes still burned with the same madness.

'Good… ah… good… don't you give up on me, old snake!'

Sunny wanted to kill the hateful beast, but he didn't want that death to be swift. No, he wanted his enemy's agony to last forever. He wanted to tear its flesh with his fangs forever, feel the shudders of pain pulsing through its body forever, hear its pained cries forever…

'Control yourself!'

Snapping out of the consuming madness, he reminded himself of his goal. He needed to kill the Azure Serpent as fast as possible — not only because his essence was not limitless, but also because the chances of him being killed by the Great Beast were much higher than the other way around.

If there was the smallest chance, he had to take it.

It was just that… there were no chances.

Still, there were none.

The mad beast was still in full control of both itself and the battlefield. The water flowed and twisted to aid it and constrain Sunny, as if obediently following the ancient serpent's commands.

Even with its body looking like that of a battered corpse and its mind flooded with pain, the Azure Serpent remained fixated on the solitary goal of destroying its opponent with a truly insane level of focus.

But Sunny…

Sunny could feel his mind growing muddled, and his reason wavering.

'Oh… I can't go on much longer…'

For the first time since he had assumed the shape of the onyx serpent, the cold realization that defeat was possible entered his consciousness. The thought was so incongruous with the essence of his monstrous form that the Shadow Shell almost came undone.

He held on to his maddening fury and pushed the thoughts of defeat away.

Defeat was not possible.

Such a thing did not exist.

He would never lose… he would not lose again!

...That last thought was slightly strange, as if it was not his own.

Grinding his fangs, Sunny pushed his enormous body through the hostile water, aiming to ram the side of the twisting leviathan. He knew that the battle had already turned in his enemy's favor. So, he needed to do something to balance the scales.

But what?

The onyx serpent raged as it burned with the mad desire to destroy his enemy. However, Sunny was also calm and cool-headed.

What advantages did he have that the Great Beast did not possess?

Both of them were already half-dead. He had to kill the enemy… but being killed by the enemy seemed inevitable instead.

So, then…

The two outcomes were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Being killed did not directly stand in the way of achieving his goal. It was only the timing of his death that was the issue.

Sunny was filled with an indescribable, furious determination to slay the Azure Serpent. Nothing mattered in front of this hatred and this consuming need… least of all death. It would be all worth it if he could just feel the life leaving his enemy's bleeding body.

'Mutual destruction…'

Yes… yes, he liked it.

He liked it a lot.

This was the advantage he so desperately needed.

Dangerous flames ignited in Sunny's onyx eyes as he twisted his long neck and glared at the reeling serpent. The Great Beast must have been growing weaker, as well… his attacks and the arrows of his companions were slowly grinding down its boundless endurance. The abomination had been a split second too late and failed to evade being rammed by Sunny's serpentine head.

Which finally gave him the chance.

First, the water.

The water had been constraining Sunny, and so, he had to wrestle the control of it from the Azure Serpent first. With his understanding of the Great Beast and the experience of watching Naeve and Bloodwave fight, he could achieve dominance for a few moments, at least.

Coiling his mighty body like a spring, Sunny shot forward with incredible speed. He moved it in a specific way, forcing a powerful current to rush outward and collide with the opposing one, which had been created by the ancient leviathan. A great whirlpool appeared where the two currents collided, and he tore through it, unopposed.

Second, the target.

The target was the Azure Serpent's titanic spine. Sunny had to sever it no matter what. Usually, the spine would have been protected by layers of impenetrable muscle, a layer of impervious skin, and a dreadful armor of indestructible scales. But the mad beast had been mangled and mutilated by the long weeks of warding off marauding abominations and the eerily monstrous butterfly.

Large chunks of its flesh were missing, revealing bone. At a particular

spot just below its head, a long span of the spine was revealed, too. That was a good target to choose, especially because the abomination would not be able to use its jaws to defend it.

And, lastly — the advantage.

Sunny did indeed possess an advantage in the battle of mutual destruction. It was because the Azure Serpent was made of flesh, while he was made of shadows. If he sustained too much damage, the Shadow Shell was going to fall apart… but his incarnation, which was small and hidden in its depths, could survive.

It was just a matter of luck.

Either he would be destroyed along with the Shell, or get lucky and remain alive.

But regardless of the outcome, the hateful leviathan would die.

'I am fine with that...'

Growling viciously, the black serpent shot through the shining waters of the Great River — and, discarding all pretenses of defense, closed his jaws on the Great Beast's spine.

Chapter-1279: Raging Waves

Sunny bit into the spine of the Azure Serpent, igniting what little strength he had left into a violent and furious blaze. Billowing, shadows and flame rose from his onyx scales and wreathed him like a burial shroud. His eyes shone with mad, morbid, murderous malice and chillingly cold killing intent.

His jaw pressed down with enough force to shatter mountains.

…But the spine of a Great Beast was much stronger than a mountain chain. It resisted his obsidian fangs, refusing to be broken, cracked, or even scratched.

'Die! Die!'

Drowning in fury, Sunny put all of his resolve, all of his hatred, and all of his desire into crushing the indestructible bone. He violently jerked his head left and right, gnawing on the spine like a rabid dog. If he could not bite through it, he would saw through it. If he could not saw through it, he would grind it down…

The Azure Serpent was going to die, no matter what.

It was already half-dead, anyway…

However, so was Sunny.

He sensed the gargantuan body of the ancient leviathan moving, and coldly refused to pay it any attention. It did not matter how the mad beast would try to destroy him, or if it would succeed. Sunny had already discarded his survival instinct. The mad beast could not reach him with its harrowing maw, which meant that it was not going to be able to kill him instantly.

That was all he needed to know.

As his fangs scraped against the spine of the Azure Serpent in a frenzy, the abomination's mangled body rose and ensnared Sunny like a crushing vice. Once he was caught in the coils, there would be no escape… he knew it, but he did not care.

All he cared about was the feeling of a thin, shallow crack finally appearing under one of his fangs.

The leviathan's spine… was giving.

'Die!'

As dark glee washed over his heart, the coils tensed, crushing his ravaged shell. The strength contained within them was unlike anything Sunny had experienced before. It was truly, and utterly, harrowing.

Pressing down with harrowing strength, the Azure Serpent turned the marble carapace of the Mantle into stone dust. The serpentine body beneath it was instantly broken, the onyx scales shattering, sharp edges of broken bones piercing the skin and protruding from the horrid wounds.

There was blinding pain… but Sunny did not care.

More cracks appeared on the abomination's spine now, spreading and merging with each other, and he could feel the giant body of his enemy twitching in pain. He could also feel fragments of bone sinking beneath his fangs.

Instead of struggling to save himself, Sunny ferociously bit down on the damaged spine of the leviathan and persisted in his frenzied attempts to break and mutilate it.

'Let's see which one of us dies first, old snake… as long... as you die first... I don't mind dying second…'

The dorsal fin of the Great Beast effortlessly cut into his shell, slicing it open like a saw. Instead of blood, darkness flowed out of the vivisected serpent, only to dissolve and disappear in the soft radiance of the glowing water.

Sunny pressed his jaws together in all-consuming fury… and finally felt the bone crumble beneath his bite.

'Will my incarnation be destroyed? Or won't it?'

Not that it mattered too much…

Killing the enemy was the only thing that mattered.

There was nothing else!

A strange sound that was half a deranged roar and half a wail of agony escaped from his maw. His jaws started to slowly move toward each other.

At the same time, the damage his body had received was nearing the level of being catastrophic. By all accounts, his shell should have already come undone — but Sunny had submerged so deeply into the sensation of being a serpent that his absolute belief held it together, still.

He felt the shadows part before the sharp blade of the leviathan's fin, opening a straight path to the tiny incarnation hidden within them. Death was swiftly approaching…

But, at the same time, he felt the spine of the Azure Serpent shattering as his fangs sank into the sweet marrow.

The mad beast convulsed and let out a roar of blind agony. However, just like Sunny, it did not know surrender. It only had murder on its mind, and so, the vice of its coils only grew stronger, crushing and slicing the hateful worm with unquenchable wrath.

It was only a matter of moments now before Sunny's defenseless shadow form would be destroyed.

'Death!'

He did not know if he had called upon his enemy's death, or greeted his own.

For a split second, the shadow flame billowing from his mangled

body ignited with startling intensity. In Sunny's mind, everything disappeared. The only thing that remained was an imperative resolve to kill the enemy.

His jaw snapped shut with a deafening clap.

…In the next moment, there was nothing but pain.

Sunny lost his sight, his hearing, his smell, his sense of touch… even shadow sense was gone, leaving him in an empty abyss where the only thing that existed was agony.

All his thoughts were incinerated, and all his awareness was banished by torment.

'Ah… ah…'

He couldn't even scream, because he had forgotten how.

But, despite all that…

He was satisfied. He was thrilled.

He was happy.

'I… I… I... killed it. Right?'

There was no way to know.

But then...

As if to answer his faint plea, a familiar voice whispered:

[You have slain a Great Beast, Daeron of the Twilight Sea.]

[You have received a Memory.]

The whispers flowed into his soul as darkness encroached on his mind.

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

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As the dark island swayed under the assault of furious waves, two broken silhouettes could be seen in the raging water, slowly drifting apart.

One, much larger one, had a harrowing wound on its neck. Its spine was entirely snapped, and it was partially beheaded. A fire of indescribable madness was slowly fading away from the leviathan's damaged eye, which was locked on the unmoving figure of the enemy even in death.

The body of the Azure Serpent was slowly disappearing in the beautiful shine of the glowing waters as it fell into the depths.

The other, smaller silhouette, was torn and ravaged beyond recognition. The serpentine body of the onyx beast was cut and broken, with harrowing wounds gaping across its entire length. It seemed to be on the verge of dissolving into a swarm of intangible shadows…

Before it did, however, a graceful figure in a fluttering white tunic dove from the high slope of the island and plunged into the raging waves.

Struggling against the furious current, Nephis endured the pain of her Flaw and swam toward the onyx serpent.

Chapter-1280: Beauty and the Beast

Sunny was drowning in a sea of pain. His mind, what little of it was left, had become faint and fragile, ready to collapse at any moment.

But it had not collapsed yet.

Actually, there was a piece of good news, too. The fact that he was capable of feeling pain meant that he was still alive. The fact that he was still alive… meant that the Azure Serpent was dead.

Otherwise, it would have finished Sunny off already.

'I… won…'

It was a small consolation. The pain was so unbearable that he almost wished for death. However, Sunny was too attached to life to throw it away — if there was the tiniest chance to survive, he was going to desperately cling to it with everything he had. Before, he would have done it simply out of spite… but now, there were things he cherished and goals he wished to achieve.

He really wanted to live.

'What… the hell… is happening?'

It was hard to form legible thoughts, but he somehow managed to evaluate his current state. Overwhelming pain, the loss of all senses… he was in shock. He was in a pain shock due to his shadow incarnation receiving severe damage.

His soul had been wounded terribly.

Which meant… what?

He didn't know. What was he supposed to do? Was there anything to do?

'Argh… it hurts…'

For now, Sunny decided to do his best to endure the pain and hold his crumbling mind together. It wasn't easy, or pleasant, or possible… but he persisted. He persisted with everything he had.

And, after an eternity of torment, there was finally a change.

Sunny seemed to regain his hearing.

The first thing he heard was Neph's distorted cry:

"Sunny! Don't die! Please!"

He was strangely annoyed.

'Crap… that was an order, wasn't it?'

She broke her promise!

Not that it could change anything… it would have been great if Nephis giving him an order to survive magically restored his body and healed his wounds. But Sunny had to be able to execute a command for Shadow Bond to compel him into action — or inaction.

So, if Nephis suddenly decided to order him to go and bring her the moon one day, at most he would be forced to fruitlessly try his best.

…And he was already trying his best to survive!

'No really, who does she take me for?'

Nephis had been the one who called him a cockroach, in the first place. As a compliment. Of course, he would do everything in his power to remain alive. There was no need to shout…

Sunny slowly realized that his thoughts were becoming longer and more cohesive.

'Something is changing…'

Slowly, his senses returned, one after another. Hearing was first, followed by shadow sense, sense of touch, smell, taste, and finally sight. It was all a proper mess, though — his vision was blurry, and his other senses were going haywire.

There was more pain, too, this time of a physical nature.

'Why am I even feeling physical pain? I am a manifested shadow right now, technically…'

Perhaps it was a phantom pain. Even though Sunny did not possess a human body at the moment, his mind was still that of a human. And when his mind perceived the dreadful damage done to his shadow body, it reacted the only way it knew how — by panicking and drowning itself in pain.

'Curses…'

Sunny gritted his teeth, and was startled by the fact that he had regained the ability to grit his teeth. Even more surprising was the fact that it was fangs and not teeth that he was grinding against each other.

His shell seemed to have held together, somehow.

Finally, he became lucid enough to understand the situation.

The tumultuous waters of the Great River were suffused with a soft radiance, indicating that it was still night. More than that, he judged that less than a minute had passed since his final clash with the Azure Serpent… with Daeron of the Twilight Sea.

He knew that because the colossal corpse of the ferocious Great Beast could still be seen, barely, as it slowly sank into the depths of the river. The frightening silhouette of the ancient leviathan grew smaller as it fell into the unfathomable depths and dissolved in the beautiful glow.

A complicated mix of emotions rose in Sunny's heart when he saw his enemy dead. There was dark glee, a strange hint of sorrow, respect, contempt, hatred, curiosity, suspicion…

There was also a strong feeling of regret.

That was a Supreme soul shard disappearing into the depths, after all!

He groaned.

Turning his attention away from the body of the slain leviathan, Sunny tried to understand what was happening around him.

He perceived his long serpentine body, now mangled and savagely ripped apart. It felt weak — understandably so, but also weaker than that.

'The soul flame…'

The soul flame was gone. He was only augmented by the five shadows now.

Finally, Sunny noticed Nephis.

Her small figure was on top of him. She must have climbed onto his giant body while he was floating lifelessly in the water, paralyzed by pain and on the verge of losing consciousness. Both of her palms were pressed against broken onyx scales, and her skin was shining with soft white radiance.

'Ah… she must have retrieved her flames…'

Nephis was healing him.

'But..'

…Suddenly, her radiant figure exploded with light, dispelling the darkness of the night like an actual star.

Sunny felt the familiar warmth — now much more intense than it had ever been before — flowing into him like a flood. And, embraced by that warmth, his broken form started to restore itself.

As he felt it, startled, his deeply wounded soul was healed. His half-destroyed shadow incarnation was restored to a pristine state. And,

shockingly, even his serpentine shell knitted itself back together. The harrowing wounds closed, the shattered onyx scales glued themselves back together.

By the time Neph's radiance wavered and fell, Sunny was as good as new.

The pain that had been tormenting him receded, then disappeared completely.

He was alive again.

Nephis fell powerlessly on his wide back. She remained motionless for a few moments, then dragged her body up and clutched to two of the horn-like spikes growing from the crown of his head, where the dorsal fin ended.

'Right…'

The Azure Serpent was dead, but they were still far from being safe.

In fact, they were in mortal peril, much more so than when the Great Beast had been alive.

It was because there was no one to stop the Dark Butterfly from conquering the carcass of the Black Turtle anymore. Worse than that, the abominable creature had surely noticed a blinding star suddenly igniting in the darkness of the night. It was bound to descend upon them at any moment.

So, it was time for the second part of the plan.

'We actually made it so far, huh?'

It was time to leave the dark island behind, and run.

'Let's go, Neph…'

Dismissing Saint, Sunny spent a split second to gather the strength permeating the vast expanse of his mighty, serpentine body.

Then, with Nephis on his back, he lowered his head and dove into the

endlessly flowing, radiant waters of the Great River.

Chapter-1281: Leaving the Dark Island

Sunny dove into the shining depths of the Great River. His serpentine body was like a spear carved from black onyx, cutting through the radiant water with stunning, terrible speed. It was made to rule the sea, so no ship or vessel could compete with him in the deep.

A Great Monster, though…

Even though the Dark Butterfly was an aerial abomination, it had shown a dreadful ability to fight the Azure Serpent underwater with strange ease. They needed to escape being noticed by it… and so, Sunny swam down.

Nephis had the Essence Pearl, so he was not afraid of pulling her so deep that she would drown. That said… he was afraid of the depths.

There was no telling what was hiding at the bottom of the Great River. What kind of horrors lived there? Did time exist there, and if so, what was its flow? Sunny did not know, and he wasn't ready to find out.

The plan they had concocted was to dive deep enough to avoid the notice of the Dark Butterfly and then travel downstream, gradually returning to the surface. He saw no reason to change it.

As the onyx serpent moved down into the flowing abyss with a fragile human figure clutching to his horns, the dark island slowly disappeared in the distance. Its ominous silhouette was consumed by the radiance of the water, and soon, there was nothing around them but shining emptiness.

Sunny felt a strange melancholy brush against his heart, and steeled himself.

They had finally escaped from the shell of the Black Turtle. That place… it had given him the peace and comfort he so desperately needed after the disastrous resolution of the dreadful and bitterly long Southern Campaign. For a while, it was like a paradise.

But that paradise was a dark one. In the end, it had turned into a death trap — and now, they were leaving both the paradise and the trap behind.

'Don't look back.'

He refused to. There were, without a doubt, a lot of much more harrowing obstacles waiting for them ahead. And, hopefully, at the end of them all…

They would be able to find a new paradise of their own.

Sunny carried Nephis deeper and deeper into the Great River. Slowly, the radiance of the water grew brighter, its flow more tumultuous, and the pressure assaulting them heavier. Knowing that his serpentine shell was much more resilient than Neph's body, he hesitated to go any further.

It was enough, anyway… if the Dark Butterfly was going to pursue them, it would have already plunged into the river and attacked.

A powerful sense of relief flooded his mind.

'Thank the gods…'

Sunny barely survived a battle with a Great Beast, and that was mostly due to the fact that the Azure Serpent had already been wounded, exhausted, and close to death. Fighting a Great Monster immediately after that battle would have surely been the end of him.

Twisting his giant body, Sunny slowed their descent, and then pushed forward. His already tremendous speed increased even more when he started to move with the current. It was to such a degree that Nephis struggled to hold on to his horns despite her Ascended strength.

But there was no helping it.

Now that they had escaped the dark island and the monstrous butterfly, another challenge lay in front of them, one that was perhaps even harder to overcome.

That challenge was the expanse of the Great River itself.

There was no point in leaving the dark island if all that awaited them was a slow, agonizing death. There were harrowing abominations of all kinds dwelling both in the water and in the boundless sky. Without anywhere to find shelter, doom was all but guaranteed — they might escape it once or twice, perhaps even a dozen times…

But sooner or later, exhaustion would overwhelm them, and their luck would run out. Then, the Great River would become their grave.

That was why Sunny and Nephis had a clear goal in mind. They had to travel downstream, as far into the past as they could, and discover the ancient people who had entered the Tomb of Ariel thousands of years ago.

Sunny was incredibly swift while encased in the shell of the onyx serpent. He could cover a great distance in a short amount of time, traveling much further than the carcass of the Black Turtle had been pulled by the current in an entire month.

The problem was essence.

Existing as a shadow incarnation was consuming his essence, and sustaining the massive shape of the river serpent was consuming it as well. He had already spent a lot of essence fighting the mad leviathan, and although Neph's flame was enhancing his soul to a degree, his reserves were not infinite.

Even though he was a Tyrant, they were not at all adequate for the task at hand.

And so, Sunny had to hurry. He had to squeeze all the speed he could muster from his serpentine form while he could.

If his essence ran out before they found land, or anything at all to climb onto… there would be no choice but to remain drifting in the water, slowly recovering their powers and hoping desperately that

nothing would attack them in the meantime.

The dwellers of the deep, the swarms of abominable krill, the flying predators that hunted creatures inhabiting the river…

He didn't think that they would live long enough for their essence to be replenished.

Praying that something appeared on the horizon, Sunny flew through the shining water.

His powerful body cut through the flowing abyss, leaving a trail of raging turbulence in its wake. Nephis clung desperately to his horns, exhausted by the explosion of healing flames she had created earlier to save him, and the harrowing pain of having to use her Aspect for so long, and with such intensity.

Strangely enough, Sunny had ended up in a better state than her, despite being the one who had fought in the battle with the Azure Serpent. The longer they swam, the more worried about her he became.

…But he was tired, too.

His wounds might have healed, but the terrible mental exhaustion remained, smothering his ability to remain clear-headed and strive forward without rest.

Slowly, a cold lethargy was seeping into his mind.

Struggling against it, he continued to swim forward.

Chapter-1282: Currents of Time

Sunny did not know how far, exactly, they had traveled away from the dark island, but the distance had to be immense. His shadow shell was not only enormous, it was also created to reign in the water. Considering that he was moving with the current of the Great River, his already great speed was enhanced even more.

So, he decided that it would be safe to rise to the surface.

Gradually ascending, he tore through the radiant abyss and finally raised his head above the glistening waves.

Still clinging to his horns, Nephis slumped down and breathed heavily. It had been hard for her to withstand the resistance of the water, which had been battering her like a ram for so long.

The greater Sunny's speed was, the greater was the resistance. She had already been exhausted by straining her Ability beyond its limit, and enduring the feverish race through the depths could not have been easy.

But now that the onyx serpent's head was above water, Nephis could finally rest a little.

The sky was still impenetrably black. A soft glow was rising from the river, illuminating the vast emptiness of its flowing expanse. The view was as dreamlike and magical as it had been on the first day Sunny had seen it…

But his heart was pierced by despair.

It was because even now, after leaving the dark island so far behind, he couldn't see any hint of land anywhere around them.

An old doubt crawled into his mind, sapping strength from his tired

body.

'What if there is no land… what if this whole world is nothing but water…'

Gritting his fangs, Sunny let out a quiet growl and strained every fiber of his shell to accelerate even more.

With his onyx snout as the spearhead and his black dorsal fin as a sharp blade, he cut the glowing surface of the Great River. Faster, faster… he was not out of essence yet.

There was a certain sense of exhilaration he felt, flying toward the horizon with terrible speed. The speed, the might of his shell, the slender weight of Neph's body pressing down on his scales, and the empty vastness of the boundless black sky… it was almost liberating.

But, at the same, his heart was drowning in anxiety, fear, and dread.

And soon, he was proven right to be afraid.

Sunny felt an ominous premonition and rose his head a little higher above the water. In the next moment, his serpentine eyes narrowed.

There, ahead of them… the surface of the Great River was seething and boiling. A boundless krill swarm was swiftly moving to meet them, hundreds of thousands of Corrupted Beasts burning with a mad desire to devour the onyx serpent and his rider alive.

Sunny's enormous body shuddered, but he tried to remain calm.

'This is not the end…'

The krill swarm was a harrowing foe, but the terror of it lay in how numerous the River Locusts were. The hungry legion rushing toward Sunny was the largest he had ever seen by far, enough so that even the Azure Serpent might have been unable to prevail against it. However…

Unlike the ancient leviathan, Sunny was not constrained by the need to defend his prey, and while the krill were numerous, they were not individually strong.

Much more importantly, they were not too fast.

Cutting a sharp turn, Sunny roared and flew west, parallel to the approaching mass of abominations. His feverish thoughts dissolved into a simple, bestial need to outrun the swarm. The distance between them grew smaller with frightening speed, and yet he still couldn't see the edge of the vast patch of rough water.

And by the time he saw it, there was no time left.

'Damn it!'

As Nephis picked herself up and summoned a sword, Sunny plunged into the mass of krill. The water surged around him, creating a barrier… but more than a few abominations passed through it.

His jaws snapped, and Neph's sword flashed.

…A few moments later, they broke the wall of River Locusts and tore free of the swarm. Sunny had just barely reached the edges of the rough water patch, and even though they had to go through the krill at the very end, the expanse of the Great River in front of them was clear.

Sunny swam with all his might, skirting the pursuing swarm and increasing the distance between the slithering locusts and his tail.

'Faster, faster, faster…'

Soon, the krill were left far behind. Nephis slumped again, clutching her sword with a trembling hand.

…He did not have a lot of essence left.

They continued to move downstream, covering a tremendous distance. The onyx serpent flew like an arrow… no, much faster than any arrow could fly. But that was still not enough.

After the first swarm, there was another.

After the second swarm, there was a harrowing creature that lunged at them from the depths.

After the creature, there was a gargantuan mass of rotting seaweed that almost ensnared and devoured them, a dozen grotesque maws suddenly appearing from beneath the swaying weeds.

And after that, there were more horrors than he could count. Flocks of predatory birds that seemed to have pearls growing in their desiccated flesh, invisible creatures that were able to instantly turn large spans of the river into adamantine ice, ghostly lights that burned in the depths of the water, filling their minds with an indescribable desire to approach them…

But Sunny was a river serpent, a monarch among beasts. His long body was fast, mighty, and tenacious. He was incredibly fast and at home in the water. He had outrun the krill, tore through the rotting seaweed, dove into the depths to avoid the birds of prey, broke through the ice, resisted the allure of the ghostly lights…

He had escaped from them all.

However…

His essence was running dry. It was almost gone. He was exhausted and well past the limits of his mental strength.

And there was still no land in sight.

By the time the seven suns slowly appeared from beyond the horizon, chasing away the impenetrable darkness, and the Great River stopped shining…

He was utterly spent.

It was not even a matter of willpower anymore. It was simply a matter of not having anything else to give. His essence was fully depleted.

Finally, despair consumed his heart.

The shadow shell was the first to crumble. The mighty onyx serpent shuddered, and then dissolved into shadows, which were instantly chased away by the pale light of dawn.

His incarnation disappeared next. Sunny turned intangible, and was then thrown out of the embrace of the shadows, finally regaining his human form.

He was in pain. Every muscle in his body felt like it was about to burst. His lungs felt as if they were consumed by fire. His head was heavy, and his limbs were weak.

He even failed to adapt to the change in time, swallowing a mouthful of water.

…Which was fine. He was dying from thirst, anyway.

Sunny felt himself sinking, and struggled weakly to stay afloat. But even that was too much of a strain.

'Am I… going to drown?'

A moment later, a strong arm embraced him, and he felt Nephis pressing his body against hers. Swimming with the help of her one free hand, she pulled them both upward.

Soon, their heads broke the surface of the water.

Sunny was momentarily blinded by sunlight and coughed, trying to push air into his lungs.

'Over… it's over… we won't survive the few days needed for our essence to recover…'

As he tried to think of something — anything — that could keep them alive, a strange shiver suddenly ran through Neph's body. Since she was still hugging him from behind, he could feel it clearly.

"Sunny… Sunny…"

He tried to answer, and was suddenly struck by the strangeness of his human body. It felt alien and tiny, not at all befitting a ferocious serpent like him.

He had forgotten how to talk.

'Snap out of it, damn it.'

Sunny slowly gathered his senses, remembering what it meant to be human. Then, he moved his unfamiliar tongue and said hoarsely:

"What?"

Nephis moved, turning them both to face downstream. Her voice was just as hoarse as his:

"There!"

He frowned, following the direction where her finger was pointing with his gaze, and then froze.

There, on the water, no more than a hundred meters away…

A small boat was swaying on the waves, both of its sails lowered.

It was made out of beautiful dark wood, with intricate patterns carved along its sides. There was no movement inside, but the boat seemed to be staying in place, strangely unaffected by the strong current of the Great River.

And so, they were being slowly pulled in its direction.

Chapter-1283: Ketch

A small wooden vessel was resting on the sparkling water. The seven suns were rising from the distant depths, and the world was painted in the lilac hues of early dawn. Illuminated by that beautiful light, the vessel seemed like an illusion.

"What… is this?"

His hoarse voice was full of disbelief. It was just too improbable, to find an empty boat swaying gently on the waves just when his essence had run out, and despair had taken hold of his heart. The Great River was inconceivably vast, and yet, they had just happened to find themselves a mere hundred meters away from a boat at that exact moment?

Even when [Fated] was involved, the coincidence seemed too convenient. It was to such a degree that Sunny even considered that he was hallucinating… wouldn't be the first time, anyway. Maybe the Sin of Solace had learned a new trick.

However, Nephis saw the boat, too.

She hesitated for a moment, then said numbly:

"...It's a ketch."

Sunny was about to ask what the word ketch meant, but he was too tired for unnecessary questions. It was probably a type of boat, regardless… Nephis knew about these things, considering that she had even built one for them, back on the Forgotten Shore.

It was probably also a part of her Legacy training.

The two of them remained still for a few seconds, then swam toward the... ketch. Well, Nephis was the only one swimming while

supporting Sunny — he just weakly moved his legs to help her a little.

Soon, they reached it. Sunny placed his palm on the hull of the sailboat, still unsure if it was real. However, the dark wood felt smooth and solid to his touch. He traced his hand across it, both stunned and relieved.

'It might be a trap…'

Even if it was, they had no choice but to climb into the ketch. It was too small to protect them from great abominations like the Azure Serpent, but anything was better than nothing. More than that… the ketch couldn't be as simple as it looked. It was drifting in the harrowing waters of the Great River without a scratch on its hull, after all.

A mundane boat would have been destroyed in a matter of hours here.

Even the piece of flotsam that Sunny had once used as a raft, which was tough enough to withstand the nails of a Master, was turned into tiny splinters. It had to have been a part of a large vessel before turning into flotsam, too, and that mysterious vessel had ended up being destroyed.

Plus… the ketch was not really drifting. It was staying in place, unaffected by the current of time. So, it was certainly special in some way.

A tentative spark of hope ignited in Sunny's heart.

Despite the modest size of the wooden sailboat, its sides were too tall for them to simply climb over them, especially in their weakened state. However, a rope ladder was conveniently lowered into the water near the bow of the ketch, as if inviting them in.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other. His paranoia was acting up — not without a reason — and from the looks of it, she felt the same way. But there was no decision to make.

Since salvation miraculously presented itself, they would be fools not

to accept the unexpected gift.

Nephis pushed Sunny toward the ladder, and then helped him climb up.

Falling over the side of the ketch, Sunny sprawled on the wooden floor. The feeling of something solid under him was both unfamiliar and heavenly. The gentle swaying of the boat was like a lullaby.

'Ah…'

A moment later, Nephis awkwardly climbed over the rim and tumbled down, landing squarely on top of him. Sunny let out a weak groan.

"Ow..."

They remained motionless for a few moments, catching their breaths, then slowly extricated themselves from each other and took a cautious look around.

The ketch was not too big, about seven meters long. Its layout was very simple. There was only a single deck, with no roofed interior or cabins. The deck was completely open, with two masts — a longer one and a shorter one — rising into the air like slender, dark pillars.

Everything was made with a mundane, but exquisite level of craftsmanship. The wooden surfaces were tastefully engraved, showing all sorts of flowing images, now smoothed out by the wind, water, and passage of time. The ketch seemed like the loving creation of a supremely skilled artisan, even if it had seen better days.

One look was enough to tell that the wooden boat was very old. However, it had been maintained with the utmost care, remaining in near-perfect condition.

Sunny was musing about who could have taken care of the ketch when his gaze finally reached the stern, where the steering oar was supposed to be. Unlike the Chain Breaker, there was no runic circle for the helmsman. Instead, there was only a very mundane wooden bench…

And there, on that bench, a corpse was sitting with its head hung low.

His body suddenly grew stiff.

'W—what…'

Sunny was momentarily paralyzed by shock.

Because that corpse… it looked eerily familiar.

It was shrouded in a dark mantle, which made it hard to determine whether the body belonged to a man or a woman. All that he could see was that the person was of small stature, and terribly thin. Their long white hair moved slightly in the wind, and their face…

The face was obscured by a mask of black lacquered wood. The mask was carved to resemble the face of a ferocious demon. Its teeth were bared, with four fangs protruding from its mouth, and there were three twisted horns rising from it like a crown. Inside the black chasms of its eyes, there was nothing but pure darkness.

It was Weaver's Mask.

And the corpse was just like the one he had found beneath the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, all those years ago.

Chapter-1284: Hail Weaver

Sunny found himself unable to move for a few moments. Encountering the ketch just when they desperately needed shelter was already shocking enough. Finding a corpse that looked eerily similar to the nameless prisoner of the hidden dungeon beneath the ruined cathedral inside the ketch… it sent him into a fugue state.

All kinds of wild thoughts rushed through his mind.

For a split second, Sunny even imagined that it was his own corpse, brought here from the future by some strange anomaly of the mystical river. But, no… the proportions were all wrong. He was not a tall man, but the mysterious person was even smaller. They were practically tiny.

In fact, now that Sunny had taken a good look at the corpse, he realized that it was different from the prisoner of the ruined cathedral, as well. The dark mantle and the mask were the same, but the body hidden beneath them was not. Even with its features obfuscated, he could tell the difference.

Still… what was the meaning of this? How could there be another Weaver's Mask? Who were these two people, and how could they be so similar despite the great divide between the Dark City and the Tomb of Ariel?

Nephis seemed startled, as well, albeit for a different reason than Sunny. She did notice his strong reaction, though.

"Sunny? What is it?"

She must have noticed that the mask the corpse was wearing was the same mask Mongrel wore. She also knew that it was a Divine Memory of the Seventh Tier, even if Sunny had never told her where Weaver's Mask came from.

He took a deep breath.

"That corpse… it's just like the one I found in the Dark City, beneath the cathedral. That was where I got the mask."

Sunny had found the Spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird by pure coincidence — even if that coincidence might not have happened without the influence of [Fated]. Everything that followed after absorbing the drop of ichor that contained Blood Weave, however, was the result of logic and reason. It was the consequence of that first chance encounter.

Guided by the ability to see the radiance of divinity, which Blood Weave granted him, he explored the cathedral of the Dark City and received Weaver's Mask. Guided by Weaver's Mask, he dove into the Sky Below, reached the Ebony Tower, and discovered Weaver's severed arm, thus acquiring Bone Weave.

What was the cause of this situation, then? Was it a coincidence or the result of his choices?

As Sunny was spacing out, consumed by these thoughts, Nephis looked at him with a frown.

"...Corpse? What do you mean?"

He shivered.

Could she not see the hunched figure sitting on the helmsman's bench?

He took a step forward and pointed with a hurried motion.

"T-that… don't you see that corpse?"

Nephis seemed both wary and slightly confused.

"Of course, I see that person. It's just that… why do you keep calling them a corpse? That person is alive."

Sunny eyes widened.

…And in the next moment, the corpse moved.

With a deep sigh, its hanging head rose, and two dark chasms carved into the fearsome mask stared at Sunny with an ineffable emotion.

Then, the corpse slowly, arduously stood up.

No, not the corpse… the person. The wearer of Weaver's Mask was, indeed, alive.

Sunny watched silently, unable to move. Only his hand stretched out a little, ready to summon a weapon.

Once the owner of the ketch rose to their feet, he realized that they were indeed very small. The figure shrouded by the dark mantle was extremely thin, seeming weak and frail. The person's back was hunched, and their hands seemed to be shaking slightly.

It was no surprise that Sunny had mistaken the wearer of the mask for a corpse. With the person remaining utterly motionless and his perception painted by the encounter in the dungeon of the ruined cathedral, it would have been strange for him to assume that they were alive.

The hunched stranger froze, looking at them through the lightless pits of the black lacquered mask's eyes. Sunny and Nephis weren't moving, either, not knowing what to do.

They had just unceremoniously climbed into this person's boat… so, what was there to do? Ask politely to be saved? Or attack them out of fear?

Sunny secretly shifted his gaze, trying to determine whether the wearer of the mask was a human or a Nightmare Creature. However, just like with the corpse beneath the cathedral, the dark mantle and the mask were impenetrable. Beyond them lay an unknowable abyss.

An icy chill crept up his spine.

Then, the owner of the ketch slowly raised their hands, which were wrapped in black gloves. The thin fingers touched the edges of the black lacquered mask and slowly pulled it down.

The face that was revealed belonged to a human. She was an old, extremely old woman. Sunny had never seen anyone who looked so ancient. He couldn't quite believe that someone that aged could still be alive.

Her tan skin was covered in a spiderweb of deep, cavernous wrinkles and clung to her emaciated face like fragile paper. Her long hair was entirely white and thin, revealing glimpses of the brown parchment of her scalp. Her eyes, which had been piercing once, were now dull and obscured by milky cataracts.

The old woman's small, hunched body was frail and thin, as if ready to collapse from the smallest gale. The dark mantle hung listlessly from it, a few sizes too big.

Nevertheless, she was emanating a feeling of unimpeachable dignity, willpower, and… sanctity, even.

The black mask fell to the deck of the ketch with a wooden clack.

The old woman was looking at Sunny and Nephis silently, one moment passing after another.

And then, she moved.

Bending down, she groaned and slowly kneeled. Sunny was startled, but most of all, he felt a strong urge to jump forward and stop her. It felt incredibly wrong, to see such an old woman prostrating herself… let alone in front of him.

He noticed Neph's back growing stiff, as she felt the same. The corner of her eye twitched.

But neither of them moved.

Finally, the old woman's knees touched the deck. Placing both hands in front of her, she took a shaky breath, and then kowtowed deeply.

Her quiet voice sounded like a scraping quill. Hearing it, Sunny flinched.

She said:

"Hail… Weaver… Demon of Fate…"

In the silence that followed, he hesitated for a while, and then answered:

"...Firstborn of the Unknown."

The old woman remained motionless for a few moments, and then let out a long sigh.

Lowering her head even closer to the deck, she spoke with reverence:

"Ananke greets the Children of Weaver..."

Chapter-1285: Ananke

"Ananke greets the Children of Weaver…"

The word hung in the air. Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other warily, both confused by this strange situation. Why was the old woman prostrating in front of them? Why had she addressed them as children of Weaver?

'What is going on?'

Sunny was tired out of his mind, and the inexplicable nature of the strange old woman was simply too much for him to process.

She didn't seem hostile, at least.

With a sigh, he allowed his exhausted body to collapse and sat down on the wooden deck of the ketch. Nephis, meanwhile, hesitated for a few moments, then took several steps forward and carefully pulled the old woman up.

"Please rise, Grandmother. Do not bow on our account."

The owner of the ketch — Ananke — allowed herself to be gently pulled into a sitting position. Then, Nephis returned to Sunny and sat side by side with him. The two of them were now facing the old woman, waiting for her to say something.

But she remained silent.

After a few moments passed, Sunny frowned. He felt nervous… there was no telling just how powerful this woman was, and what her intentions were. Ananke was a complete mystery.

…She could also provide answers to many mysteries that had plagued him.

So, he asked:

"I am sorry, Grandmother… but why did you call us the Children of Weaver?"

There were many questions he wanted to ask, but this one was the most pressing — its answer could explain how Old Ananke would treat them.

The old woman took a deep sigh, then spoke in her thin, creaky voice:

"Because you are the Chosen of the Nightmare Spell. You are... a miracle. Your existence is Weaver's triumph."

A proud smile appeared on her lips. It was warm and almost… motherly. As though she was indeed a grandmother looking at her young, beautiful grandchildren.

Sunny took a deep breath, feeling embarrassed.

'Weaver's triumph…'

He was all but certain that the Nightmare Spell had been created by the Demon of Fate. Now, the last, tiny sliver of doubt had disappeared. Weaver was indeed the being responsible for the great calamity that had befallen Earth… or maybe for its salvation.

Regardless, Old Ananke seemed to have a deep connection to Weaver and the Nightmare Spell. She was also, most likely, one of the people they had wanted to find — a native inhabitant of the Great River. One of the ancient people who had entered the Tomb of Ariel before the gods fell.

…But wouldn't it mean that she had come to the Great River before the Spell was created?

Things were still not making any sense.

As if reading his thoughts, Nephis leaned forward and asked as politely as she could:

"Forgive me for asking, but who are you, Grandmother?"

Ananke smiled. What she said next made both Sunny and Nephis flinch:

"...I am Ananke. The Priestess of the Nightmare Spell."

In the silence that followed, the old woman gently shook her head.

"It must be hard for you to imagine, my Lord and Lady. You come from a time when the Nightmare Spell has matured and rules unopposed, its blessings given freely to all. But it wasn't always like that.

At the beginning, which was also the end, when the Nightmare Spell was still in its infancy, there was a need for people like me to tend to it, protect it… and, above all, to help it spread, so that it could grow stronger."

Her wrinkled face grew somber, and a heavy sigh escaped from her lips.

"Which wasn't easy… wasn't easy at all. After all, we, the followers of a daemon, were deemed heretics and persecuted by servants of the gods. All were despised, many were hunted down and put to death. Well… not that I experienced any of that myself."

Every sentence the old woman spoke was a revelation, and they followed one after another. There were so many startling pieces of information she was sharing freely with them that Sunny found himself unable to digest it all.

He felt like a person who was drowning in a deep sea after spending years dying from thirst in the desert.

'Priestess of the Nightmare Spell… the beginning that was also the end? Must be the early stages of the war between the daemons and the gods… wait, the Spell was not created as it is today? It had to grow? Be grown, even? Persecuted by the gods? What?'

He was failing desperately to keep up, tired as he was.

Nephis was struggling, too, but it seemed as though she had a slightly better grasp of the conversation.

White sparks ignited in her eyes.

"So, our existence is proof that the suffering of the followers of Weaver was not meaningless? That the Nightmare Spell you worshiped and proselytized has realized its great design?"

Ananke nodded and looked at them with reverence, which made both feel uncomfortable.

"Indeed. You are very wise, my Lady."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then remarked evenly:

"...You don't seem to be surprised by the fact that we come from the future."

Sunny forced himself to focus. It was a very poignant question, and one that he had failed to think of himself, distracted by the avalanche of revelations.

The old woman slowly nodded, her breath ragged. It seemed that it was hard for her to speak for so long, but she still forced herself to answer:

"Of course, I am not surprised. Haven't you come from upstream, my Lord and Lady?"

Nephis and Sunny glanced at each other. They had indeed. The natives of the Great River, which flowed from the future into the past, would have had a different perception of time. For them, people from the future might not seem that strange.

Ananke took a breath, then added tiredly:

"Oh, but I was also warned that you would come."

'Huh?'

That was perhaps the most shocking revelation yet.

After a moment of silence, Sunny raised an eyebrow while hiding how shaken he truly was.

"...Warned? How?"

The old woman nodded again, her unbound white hair moving in the wind.

"I received a message… in my dreams. A message that the Children of Weaver would come. And that…"

She paused for a few moments, catching her breath, then finished fervently:

"...And that I must help them reach Fallen Grace, where Dusk, the last of the sybils, reigns."

Chapter-1286: Fortuitous Encounter

Dusk… Sybil of the Fallen Grace.

Sunny shivered.

Of course, he remembered who Dusk was. He was wearing a tunic called Shroud of Graceless Dusk, after all — the Transcendent Memory of the Sixth Tier he had received for slaying the Terror of LO49.

…That damned horror.

If he were to try and assign numbers to the enemies he had faced in Antarctica based on how many mental scars they left him with, the beautiful flower of floating white silk would be squarely placed second, right behind the Winter Beast. Even Goliath, who had literally killed him, did not leave as harrowing of an impression.

Of course, Dusk was most likely neither dead nor corrupted yet in the Nightmare. She was still a human, and seemed to be ruling a place called Fallen Grace. Since Sunny and Nephis wanted to reach the civilization of the Great River and find the sybils, this destination was perfect.

…It was a little bit too perfect, even.

Ananke had answered one of the most important questions they had. The improbable coincidence of them finding her ketch just when they needed it was no coincidence at all. She had come knowingly, expecting to find them.

But who was it that had instructed her where to find them? In her dreams, no less?

Who was pulling the strings of this Nightmare behind the scenes?

'Is it, perhaps, the last sybil herself?'

Sunny frowned, knowing that he would not find the answer any time soon. The earliest opportunity was probably going to be when he came face-to-face with the Sybil of the Fallen Grace… again.

He sighed.

"...Fallen Grace? How far is that?"

Old Ananke hesitated for a few moments.

"It is far. Very, very far. So far that I won't be able to guide you all the way there."

She grew silent, her eyes closing slightly. It almost seemed as though she had dozed off.

Then, however, the old woman shook slightly, and added:

"But I will take you as far as I can go, my Lord and Lady. Ah… you see, we daemon followers weren't welcome here, in Ariel's Tomb, either. They chased us away, and we traveled upstream for a long time before settling down and building Weave. Weave… it's one of the human cities on the Great River, like Fallen Grace. Or, at least… it used to be…"

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other.

Why was it that Ananke was unable to return downstream? Was there some kind of internal strife between the locals of the Great River? Would it be dangerous for her to enter the waters controlled by the sybils?

And what did she mean, that Weave only used to be a city?

Nephis spoke cautiously:

"We wouldn't want to put you in danger, Grandmother."

The old woman smiled.

"Helping you is both my wish and privilege, my Lady. Do not worry about me… I am… of the Great River…"

Her speech was slowing down, and her words became slurred. It was obvious that the old woman was growing too tired to continue the conversation.

She seemed to have understood that, too.

With a soft sigh, Ananke raised her hands. In the next moment…

Sunny and Nephis both stared in bewilderment as a whirlwind of white sparks appeared in the air.

'She is… she is summoning a Memory.'

This action, which was so mundane and familiar to them, looked infinitely strange and out of place when performed by one of the ancient humans. It was the ability of those infected by the Spell, after all, and no one they had met in all the Nightmares possesed it.

Soon, a wooden box appeared on the deck in front of them. Ananke opened it with shaking hands and took out several items…

A beautifully embroidered tablecloth, a carafe of wine, a painted ceramic teapot with steam rising from its spout, two small cups, and two plates — one full of ripe fruits, the other full of small savory pies.

The fruits were succulent, and the pies looked freshly cooked. The items were simple and modest, even worn out a little, yet lovingly maintained.

A delicious smell spread through the air.

Ananke carefully placed everything on the tablecloth and offered the food to Sunny and Nephis.

"My Lord, My Lady… you must be tired after braving the horrors of the future. Please, eat and rest. I… I will guide us back to Weave, first…"

She took a deep breath, then slowly rose to her feet and walked back to the helmsman's bench with effort. Sitting down on it, the old woman tiredly lowered her head and whispered several strange, unintelligible words.

In the next moment, the ketch suddenly moved.

The midnight-colored sails rose by themselves and billowed in the wind, while the steering oar swayed, turning the bow of the boat downstream. Soon, they were sailing across the sparkling expanse of the Great River, slowly gaining speed.

Sunny and Nephis hesitated for a bit. Both of them were completely exhausted and incredibly hungry, but… they still did not trust the old woman.

What if the food was poisoned? What if she was waiting until they fell asleep to kill them?

Sunny glanced at the frail figure of the priestess. She looked too fragile and weak to pose any threat to them. Of course, looks could be deceiving… but he also felt that Ananke had been sincere and treated them with nothing except great benevolence. It was hard to dislike or distrust the kind, earnest old woman.

'Ah, whatever…'

Even if she had done something to the food, he was very hard to poison. Blood Weave made him all but immune to most toxins, after all.

Shaking off the mad desire to devour everything in sight — the faint remnant of the ferocious form of the river serpent — he tentatively picked up a savory pie, still warm from the oven, and took a bite.

His hand trembled.

'Delicious… so delicious…'

Not wasting any more time, Sunny sent the whole pie into his mouth and chewed greedily. A few moments later, he raised his thumb and nudged Nephis with his elbow.

She lingered for a moment, then followed his example.

They ate and drank like two kids being spoiled by their grandmother, oblivious to everything else. Soon, the entire meal disappeared. They didn't even spare the wine.

After that… Sunny felt incredibly sleepy.

But it wasn't the unnatural feeling of having been drugged. It was simply the natural reaction of his abused body demanding some well-deserved and much-needed rest.

'Safe… we're safe, I think...'

Struggling to keep his eyes open, Sunny looked at Nephis. She was tired, too, and yet she nodded to answer his silent question.

"It's alright. I'll take the first watch. You can…"

Before she even finished the sentence, Sunny had already dropped his head on her lap, fast asleep.

Chapter-1287: Blissful Ignorance

Sunny slept like a baby. There were no nightmares haunting his dreams, and when he woke up, his heart felt strangely at peace. He remained motionless for a while, feeling the warmth of Neph's hand resting on the crown of his head. The ketch was moving swiftly across the water, carried by both the wind and the current, and the world around them was dark.

It was already night.

'...I overslept.'

Nephis should have woken him up. Had she gotten any rest herself?

Turning his head slightly, Sunny looked up and saw her elegant jawline. She was leaning on the wooden side of the ketch, her eyes closed. Her breathing was slow and deep. She was fast asleep.

So… no one was keeping watch.

"Don't be upset with the Lady, my Lord."

Sunny flinched slightly and glanced at the stern of the boat, where Ananke was still sitting, holding lightly to the steering oar. Her dark mantle was of the same color as the night sky, making it hard to discern where its folds ended, and the night began.

"You both needed rest."

Sunny felt very comfortable laying on Neph's lap, but he had to sit up with a reluctant sigh. Rubbing his eyes, he looked at his shadows, which were all but invisible in the darkness. None of them showed any sign of being concerned, so he judged that the old woman had

not tried anything strange while they slept.

Even though it would take a few more days for his reserves of essence to be fully replenished, they were not dry anymore. Due to the Shroud of Dusk, he also felt rested and refreshed.

However, he was slightly hungry.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, and then asked:

"Say… you wouldn't happen to have more of those little pies?"

Ananke smiled.

"There should be a few left in the box. Eat well, my Lord. I made them with care."

Sunny noted that the wooden box was not a Memory that created food, but instead a storage Memory that helped keep supplies fresh. Everything inside must have been prepared by Ananke in anticipation of meeting the Children of Weaver.

Opening the lid, he discovered a few leftover pies, as well as more fruit and a couple other simple dishes, all perfectly fresh and preserved. It smelled so wonderful that he remained motionless for a moment, enjoying the fragrance.

Misunderstanding his hesitation, the old woman spoke:

"I'm sorry that I can't offer you more, my Lord. It is… not easy for me to procure fruit and flour, these days. I hope you are not too disappointed."

Sunny looked at her and smiled.

"What are you talking about, Grandmother? I once ate nothing but rotten devil meat for an entire month. This is nothing short of a feast."

To illustrate his point, he picked up one of the pies and greedily pushed it into his mouth.

Ananke tilted her head a little.

"...Do people still suffer from hunger in the future?"

Sunny chewed for a long time before answering. The old woman clearly believed that the future was some kind of a paradise that she and the other followers of Weaver helped create. He didn't want to hurt her feelings.

He shrugged.

"Smart people don't. Ah… but I am not too smart myself, sadly. At least not all the time."

Then, a sudden thought flashed through his mind. Sunny looked at Ananke carefully, then asked:

"...But what about you, Grandmother? Have you eaten anything?"

She was so thin and frail that he had mistaken her for a corpse not too long ago. However, she had only offered the food to them, not partaking in it herself.

Ananke gently shook her head.

"This body of mine does not get hungry often. I'll just catch some fish later."

Sunny frowned, then took out the rest of the pies and walked over to the steering oar, offering them to her:

"No, that won't do. Please eat some, too. Otherwise, my teacher will give me a beating once I come back home…"

Teacher Julius would indeed be beside himself if he learned that Sunny stuffed his belly while an elderly woman starved herself nearby… even if that woman was just a Nightmare inhabitant.

More than that, just what kind of fish was she going to catch in the Great River?

Ananke hesitated a little, then took one of the pies with a shaking

hand and smiled.

"Thank you, my Lord. That is enough."

When he went back to the box, Neph stirred slightly and opened her eyes. She stared at her empty lap for a few moments, then looked at Sunny and blinked a couple of times. Finally, she sniffed the air and turned to the wooden box, guided by the enticing fragrance of the freshly cooked food.

Her eyes glistened.

The two of them had a scrumptious meal while Ananke slowly ate her single pie. The atmosphere inside the ketch was strangely peaceful. It was as though they were sailing on a calm lake instead of the deadly expanse of the Great River, where all kinds of terrifying creatures dwelled.

The water was glowing with soft opalescence, while the sky was impenetrably black. The beautiful vista of the world hidden within the Tomb of Ariel was as dreamlike and mystical as ever.

As Sunny looked at the surface of the water, he suddenly saw its light grow dim. There was… a vast, inconceivable shadow moving somewhere unfathomably deep, below them, blocking off the radiance of the drowned suns with its endless expanse.

For a few moments, a bleak darkness enveloped the entire span of the Great River around the ketch, and then indifferently moved on.

He shivered and looked at Ananke, terror hiding in his lightless eyes.

The old woman calmly held the steering oar as she smiled.

"Don't worry, my Lord. They can't sense us."

Sunny hesitated for a while, wondering if he should ask who the "they" she spoke of were.

…In the end, he remained silent.

There were things that a person was better off not knowing. Sunny

was not sure if he could allow himself the luxury of ignorance… but he decided to enjoy being ignorant still, at least for today.

Chapter-1288: King Among Beasts

There were still a lot of questions Sunny wanted to ask Ananke, and a lot he needed to learn. But, surrounded by the silent darkness of the night, he simply listened to the gentle sound of water splashing against the hull of the swift ketch and stared at the glowing expanse of the Great River without saying a word.

A lot had happened yesterday… gods. Was it really just a day ago that he had fought the Azure Serpent? The fearsome battle, the frantic escape from the dark island — there had not been a single moment of peace for him to settle himself and contemplate these matters yet.

'It feels like a dream.'

He had really done it… he had killed a Great Beast.

Of course, it was partly due to the blessing of Neph's soul flame, as well as the fact that the Azure Serpent had been severely weakened. And yet… was there another Master in the world who could boast the same feat? Surely not.

Had there ever been?

Sunny shifted uncomfortably, afraid that the incredible achievement would go to his head. He almost wished to hear the biting remarks of the Sin of Solace, who never missed a chance to bring him down… the bastard was somewhere nearby, but kept out of sight. He could feel the faint presence of the hateful wraith at the edges of his consciousness.

Nevertheless, it was a fact — Sunny had indeed slain the Azure Serpent… Daeron of the Twilight Sea.

'What an unusual name for a Nightmare Creature.'

After observing the mad beast for so long and even assuming its form, Sunny was certain that there was something special about the ferocious abomination. Now, after learning its name, he came to strongly suspect… that the Azure Serpent was not an abomination at all.

Or at least had not always been one.

'Was the old snake actually a human once?'

Humans were all considered to be Beasts by the Spell, after all. A Sovereign, for example, could be called a Supreme Beast.

…So what would happen if a Sovereign succumbed to Corruption?

Looking at the radiant expanse of the Great River, Sunny felt restless.

'There might be a simple way to find out.'

Closing his eyes, he dove into his Soul Sea.

It was exactly the same as it had been before, with five black suns looming above the still water. Only now, after learning the truth of how the world of the Great River had been created, he perceive it in a somewhat new light.

A legion of shadows stood motionless in the silent darkness.

Sunny still remembered the time when he could count the lifeless shadows with one hand, but there were so many of them now. Thousands…

'Have I really killed that many?'

Of course, he had. From the Forgotten Shore to the Tomb of Ariel, Sunny had lived a life of slaughter... even if it had not been of his own volition. The numbers had especially swelled during the Southern Campaign, where he had been constantly surrounded by vast hordes of rampant Nightmare Creatures.

Most of the shadows were abominations — the Mountain King, the formless shadow of the unborn Spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird, the Forsaken Knight, the Mordant Mimic, the Terror of LO49, the mountainous Titan Goliath…

But there were plenty of humans, too. The nameless old slaver, Harper, Harus, Caster, Pierce, the Red Priest, the War Maidens, the soldiers of the Ivory City, Knight Amiran and the many Awakened of the Great Clans he had killed in East Antarctica, Saint Dire Fang… and many more.

There was also Solvane. Two of her, actually — one that he had slain on the Chained Island, and the other he had slain in the Kingdom of Hope. Sunny felt bizarre every time he saw them.

But he was looking for someone else right now.

He first guessed that his suspicion was right after noticing that there was no gargantuan shape of a great serpent among the shadows. And then, he finally saw him… Daeron of the Twilight Sea.

The Azure Serpent had, indeed, been a human once.

There, in the darkness, stood the shadow of a handsome man with strong facial features and fierce, downturned eyebrows. He was tall and imposing, with broad shoulders and a strong-willed, angular face. His hair was arranged in a long braid, and he wore an archaic robe that seemed both simple and regal.

'The Azure Serpent… he really was a human.'

Sunny froze, looking at the silent shadow. His heart was in turmoil.

This was the first time he had seen a human who had succumbed to Corruption. And not any human, at that — a proud and mighty Sovereign, an exalted being of the Supreme Rank. Even Solvane, who had spent thousands of years being tormented by the Wormvine, never gave up her humanity.

Who was King Daeron? Why had he come to the Tomb of Ariel? How had he ended up losing himself in the madness and turning into an abomination, becoming no different from a mindless beast?

…Would Sunny end up the same, one day?

A deep frown appeared on his face.

'Corruption…'

Sunny had not really faced Corruption yet, only the result of Corruption — those frenzied fiends humans of the waking world called Nightmare Creatures. However, he felt that if his power continued to grow, he would come into contact with it eventually. Perhaps even inevitably.

'Troubling.'

He glanced at the shadow of Daeron one last time, hesitated, and then said quietly:

"Find peace within me, Old Snake. Your nightmare is over."

The Azure Serpent had been a terrible enemy, but he had also protected Sunny and Nephis from the other horrors of the Great River. They wouldn't have been able to enjoy the blissful month on the dark island if not for his madness, hunger, and ferociousness.

Sunny had learned a lot from the great serpent, as well.

With a sigh, he turned away and walked to stand between the five black suns. There was still something he needed to see…

Sunny had received a Memory after killing the corrupted Sovereign, after all. His first Memory of the Supreme Rank.

Well… his first Memory of the Supreme Rank that he had actually earned, as opposed to mysteriously receiving it out of nowhere.

Summoning the runes, Sunny found the unfamiliar string of them and read:

Memory: [Crown of Twilight].

Memory Rank: Supreme.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Tool…

Chapter-1289: Crown of Twilight

'A tool…'

Sunny wouldn't have minded receiving a weapon or an armor, but a tool could be incredibly valuable, too. After all, he already had the Sin of Solace — the jade sword was only of the Transcendent Rank, but it still possessed the ability to cut the flesh of Great Nightmare Creatures, albeit with some effort. It was just that Sunny had to create an opportunity to use that ability first.

He also had the Mantle and the Shroud of Dusk, and while neither of them was durable enough to resist an attack by a creature like the Azure Serpent, that problem could be solved by not getting hit.

Both the lack of a suitable weapon and the absence of suitable armor could be solved. A powerful tool, meanwhile, would give Sunny more ways to find the solution. So, he was not disappointed.

Feeling both the gentle swaying of the ketch and the silent stillness of his Soul Sea, Sunny continued to study the runes. He hoped that the description of the Crown of Twilight would answer some of his questions.

It read:

Memory Description: [There was a king who ruled over a dying land. The king was valiant and wise. Refusing to embrace despair, he thought of an audacious plan, gathered his companions, and braved the endless desert to enter the Tomb of Ariel, where the Great River flowed endlessly from the future into the past. Thus, the valiant king became a guide who guarded his people in their nightmares.

They built a city at the edge of dawn and gathered an army to

vanquish that which was defiled. However, in the end, the army was destroyed, the city was lost, and the valiant king himself succumbed to madness.

Consumed by wrath and resentment, he turned into a mindless beast and roamed the Great River for countless years. Nothing could withstand his hunger and fury… until, one day, the mad king met a treacherous shadow.

"But what do you even know?" said the shadow. "Do you think you're so special? I know fury, too. I know hunger, too. I know madness, too! Oh… and I've killed plenty of creatures more powerful than me, too.

Who are you to dare stare me down, beast?"

"I am Lost from Light, who was born from the shadows. I am the rightful heir of death and the bastard son of fate. Wherever I go, ruin follows. If you had any sense, you would have run away as soon as you saw me."

And, true to his word, treacherous Lost from Light battled the mad king, eventually becoming his doom.

That was how the king who had outlived his land died.]

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What…'

It seemed that the Spell… had really liked his recent outburst. It even included it, word for word, in the description of the Crown of Twilight!

'Oh, no…'

He looked down and covered his face with a hand.

'Ah… so embarrassing!'

Had Nephis read this already?

Struggling against the desire to fall through the deck of the ketch and drown, Sunny took a deep breath and concentrated on the description. There was still a lot of information contained in the glimmering runes that he needed to ponder.

'So, Daeron came from outside the pyramid. He even fought his way through the Nightmare Desert, as opposed to entering a Seed.'

There was no doubt about it, since those who had conquered a Nightmare of a particular Rank could not enter any Seed of the same Rank again. So a Sovereign wouldn't be able to challenge a Third Nightmare.

Well… actually, there was some doubt. Nothing about the Tomb of Ariel, and this particular Nightmare, was normal. Still, Sunny believed that he was right. Daeron must have reached the Black Pyramid and entered the true Great River, as opposed to a version of it recreated by the Spell.

That next part, however, did not make any sense. He had become a guide who guarded his people in their nightmares? What did it mean?

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then frowned.

The most obvious answer… was also the most confusing. The Spell created Nightmares based on the past. The Great River, however, existed simultaneously in the past, in the present, and in the future. So, if Daeron had truly entered the real Tomb of Ariel… then he would be present in any recreation of the Great River conjured by the Spell.

Therefore, if his subjects challenged a Seed connected to the Black Pyramid, their Sovereign would be waiting for them on the other side, to help them conquer it.

'If I am right… then it was indeed an audacious plan.'

There was just one glaring problem with this theory.

It was that the Seeds of Nightmares, and the Nightmares themselves, had not existed in the ancient past of the Dream Realm. No explorer

had ever discovered signs that its human inhabitants had possessed knowledge of the Nightmares, and Noctis had not known anything about them either.

So how could Daeron come up with a plan to use the uniqueness of the Great River to help his people Transcend through a Nightmare, if there were no Nightmares at that time yet?

Then again… Ananke was from a time when the seed of the Spell had already existed. Granted, that time was at the start of the war between the daemons and the gods, so Daeron could not have lived much later — that war was the cataclysm that no one had escaped.

'Argh, so confusing…'

In any case, Daeron's plan had failed. Although many of his people managed to join him within the Tomb of Ariel, they died trying to destroy "that which was defiled"... whatever it was.

'Actually, that phrase is perhaps the most important piece of information in the entire description.'

It was important, indeed… because it hinted at the goal of the Nightmare. Which also meant that Sunny, Nephis, and the other members of the cohort would have to succeed where the ancient Sovereign and his army had failed.

'Great.'

Sunny felt a bit of dread at the prospect… but, at the same time, he also felt a little relieved. At least he knew now they wouldn't really need to search for the mystical estuary of the Great River in order to return to the waking world.

The just had to kill something that even a Sovereign had not been able to kill.

He was going to have to discuss this with Nephis.

In the meantime, though…

He still hadn't learned what his new, shiny Supreme Memory could

do.

Looking back to the shimmering runes, he read:

Memory Enchantments: [Legacy of Twilight], [King's Resentment], [Royal Promise]...

Chapter-1290: Royal Promise

Sunny raised an eyebrow, pleasantly surprised. Three enchantments on a Memory of the First Tier… that was rare. As an amateur sorcerer, he knew just how hard it was to build a varied spellweave around a single nexus.

Intrigued, he continued to study the runes.

[Legacy of Twilight] Enchantment Description: "This Memory greatly improves the rate at which the wearer's essence is replenished at the borders between day and night."

[King's Resentment] Enchantment Description: "This Memory grants the wearer complete immunity to mind attacks, but plagues them with irresistible wrath instead."

[Royal Promise] Enchantment Description: "This Memory infuses authority over water into the wearer's Domain. The extent of this authority depends on the might of the Domain."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

'Huh…'

The first enchantment was rather straightforward, and extremely useful — granted, that usefulness was situational. It would greatly speed up his recovery of essence at the borders between day and night, meaning dawn and dusk.

The second enchantment… was tricky. Complete immunity to mind attacks was an incredible trait to have, but it came at the cost of being consumed by mad fury. Sunny wasn't sure what to make of it. Luckily, it was an active enchantment, so he could use the other two without going berserk.

But the third enchantment was simply confounding.

'Infuses authority over water into a Domain? What?'

What were people like him, who didn't even have a Domain, supposed to do with it?!

Sunny took a deep breath, then left the Soul Sea and opened his eyes.

The Great River was still shining softly, the flowing water foaming as it parted before the bow of the ketch.

He hesitated for a few moments, then summoned the Crown of Twilight. Soon, a band of black metal shaped and engraved to resemble a river serpent appeared on his head.

The weight of it felt unfamiliar, but at least it prevented his hair from getting in his eyes. That was already useful enough.

'It looks cool, too…'

Sunny lingered a little, then lowered his hand toward the surface of the river and activated the [Royal Promise].

Suddenly, he felt the water… responding to him. The sense of connection he felt was faint and weak, not at all like the kinship he shared with shadows, but still, a wave suddenly rose, touching his palm for a brief moment before collapsing back into the current.

Sunny stared down with a strange expression.

'So that's how it is.'

The extent of the authority the [Royal Promise] granted to the master of the Crown of Twilight was dependent on the power of their Domain. Sunny did not have a Domain, so that extent was negligible — but it wasn't non-existent.

Leaning back, he smiled slightly.

'Still. In a world that has nothing but water, even that much will prove endlessly useful…'

The ketch continued its journey, while Sunny continued to stare at the beautiful radiance of the Great River.

The Crown of Twilight… it was an insidiously powerful Memory.

At first glance, none of its enchantments seemed too staggering. However, once he thought a bit more about them, he realized how outstanding they really were.

The [Legacy of Twilight] could help him recover his essence. The effect of a Supreme Memory would be immense, but there was a condition — it only functioned at dawn and dusk. As a veteran of the Southern Campaign, Sunny knew better than most how important managing one's reserves of essence was.

There was dawn and dusk every day, too. So, he would benefit greatly from improved rate of essence replenishment twice a day, every day. Combined with the [Blessing of Soul] of the Shroud of Dusk, that would put him in a very advantageous position… not to mention that here on the Great River, there were places where sunrise and sunset lasted endlessly, as if frozen in time.

The [King's Resentment] offered stellar defense against mind attacks — the most dreadful kind, as far as he was concerned — but would turn Sunny berserk. The benefit seemed as great as the cost was terrible… or did it? He could easily think of situations where boundless fury would only be beneficial. Wasn't it almost like a dangerous, but potent boon?

And lastly, the [Royal Promise] would give him a degree of control over water in a world where there was nothing but water. The value of such an ability was evident, but more than that, this enchantment also possessed the greatest capacity for growth.

Sunny did not doubt that the Sovereigns — the actual Sovereigns of the waking world — would stop at nothing to possess a Memory that could grant a second authority to their Domains.

Hell… since the independence of the House of Night was founded, to a large extent, on the fact that it was close to impossible to conquer the Stormsea, the Crown of Twilight could very well completely upset

the balance of power between the Great Clans. The [Royal Promise] would allow any Sovereign to add Night's territory to their own.

And yet, here he was — a mere Master — in possession of it.

Sunny smiled.

'Who knows… maybe I'll be the one who conquers the House of Night.'

However, his smile quickly disappeared. Right now, even his chances of surviving the Third Nightmare seemed incredibly bleak. In case he did manage to return home, nothing would ever compel him to attempt the Fourth. Nothing.

'Yeah… thanks, but no thanks.'

Somewhat sober now, Sunny sighed and dismissed the Crown of Twilight.

There was something else he had to think about.

The battle with the Azure Serpent had been like a feverish dream. He had turned into a mad beast to fight the great abomination… but he had also managed to remain himself. More than that, it was the first time he had succeeded in using Shadow Shell to assume the shape of a Nightmare Creature.

The shadowspawn was different, because he had lived in that body for many months. The form of the onyx serpent, however, had been constructed purely by observing the Great Beast and sensing his essence through Shadow Dance.

As a result, Sunny felt that the mastery of the fourth step of his Aspect Legacy was already within his grasp.

All he had to do was contemplate the revelations gained during the battle, absorb the knowledge, and integrate it into the systematic framework of Shadow Dance he had already established.

The evolution was already in sight… he could practically smell it.

Still, there was a bit of work left to do before he could reap the rewards.

Closing his eyes, Sunny tried to remember the perilous, ferocious battle with the Azure Serpent in all its harrowing details. It was better to do it now, while the memories were still fresh, and the remnants of the serpentine form still lingered in his mind.

Time flowed slowly.

Chapter-1291: Perilous Gift

Shadow Dance… was both the Legacy of his Aspect and a battle art Sunny had invented. That battle art was insidious, shapeless, and ever-changing… its purpose was to steal that which made the enemy strong and use it to destroy them.

The first step of Shadow Dance was the foundation of this ability. Sunny had mastered it during his bitter battle with Nephis, whom he knew all too well. It allowed him to peer into the very essence of the enemy's battle style and gain an almost supernatural understanding of what they would do, as well as the ability to mimic it.

The second step was a continuation of the first. It was the same in all aspects except for scale. Assuming the persona of Mongrel, Sunny had battled countless Awakened and absorbed their styles in order to make his ability more ubiquitous. He had mastered it during the final battle of the Dream Tournament, facing Morgan.

That breakthrough deepened his understanding of the fundamental, governing principles of battle, which in turn allowed him to shadow unfamiliar and sophisticated battle styles much faster, and with greater ease. He also gained the ability to intuitively sense the unique ways in which his opponents utilized their soul essence to make those styles possible.

The third step was different. It expanded on the first two, broadening the scope of Shadow Dance by redefining what a battle style was. Outwardly, that simply meant that Sunny had begun including Nightmare Creatures in the ranks of enemies he shadowed. Inwardly, however, the distinction was much greater. The third step had more to do with Sunny himself than with his enemies.

After plunging into the alien and perverse minds of various abominations in the Red Colosseum, he still found himself falling short of an epiphany. That was because Sunny had to let go of his

own sense of self to truly be able to shadow things that were innately different from him. He had to become more like the shapeless, formless shadows.

He had managed to pass this impossible test because of the battle with Nightmare.

The third mastery vastly broadened and improved his ability to shadow his enemies, as well as giving him the ability to perceive the flow of essence within them clearly. However, it also made Shadow Dance a double-edged sword — Sunny had found it easy to get lost in the form of an adversary, forgetting himself forever.

The best defense against this risk was his True Name, which served as the anchor of his soul.

…And now, there was the fourth step.

'It is even more dangerous.'

Sunny still felt the lingering remnants of the Azure Serpent paint his perception of the world. After delving into the form of the mad beast so deeply, he struggled to shake it off.

The fourth step was also a continuation of the previous one. A logical progression that both completed and transformed the perilous gift of the third step. The third step was about breaking the rigid constraints of Sunny's mind to make it as shapeless and adaptable as a shadow. The fourth step… was about allowing Sunny's physical form to follow suit.

The key to mastering it was Shadow Manifestation. In the dreadful crucible of Antarctica, Sunny had invented Shadow Shell and Shadow Incarnation, which gave him all the tools he needed to reach the fourth mastery. But it wasn't until the battle with Daeron of the Twilight Sea that he hammered all these elements together into a cohesive whole.

Thinking about it, he shivered.

Any form, any shape. The ability to not only grasp the essence of, but also become any creature he truly came to know. The prospect of

such an ability seemed… limitless.

But so was its danger.

'What will I become if I use the fourth step a lot?'

There was an even more frightening question. If the fourth step of Shadow Dance was already so incredible and daunting, then what would the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh steps look like?

Sunny felt that he needed to be careful, but he also knew that he was not going to let go of this power. He needed it.

With a sigh, he thought back to the battle with Daeron of the Twilight Sea and started going over every moment of it, absorbing the feeling of becoming a great serpent into his bones.

With every minute that passed, he felt the moment where everything would click together drawing closer.

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The waters of the Great River were already dimming by the time Sunny opened his eyes. He let out a deep sigh and remained motionless for a few moments, contemplating his progress.

'I'm so close…'

It was probably a matter of days, a week or two at most, before he mastered the fourth step of Shadow Dance — and received the fourth Legacy Relic. Excited, Sunny wondered what it would be.

A Shadow? A Memory? Or something else entirely, like another drop of ichor?

'Whatever it is... I hope Blood Weave doesn't gobble it up again!'

Suddenly bitter, he glanced at the horizon, and then hurriedly summoned the Crown of Twilight back.

Soon, the seven suns rose from the depths and chased away the impenetrable darkness of the night. The dim twilight of dawn

enveloped the ketch for a brief period of time.

At that moment, Sunny felt a flood of essence rush into his cores.

'Amazing.'

The rate of recovery was indeed greatly enhanced. Sunny had five shadow cores instead of one, so it took five times as long for him to recover all his essence — without the aid of the Shroud of Dusk. With it and the [Legacy of Twilight], though, it felt as though he would be able to replenish his reserves fully in the span of a single day.

Half at dawn, and another half at dusk.

If he was even slightly frugal, he would practically never run out of essence.

Feeling encouraged, he glanced at the frail figure of Ananke, then turned to Nephis.

Sunny silently pointed to the serpentine band of black metal on his head.

It was time to ask more questions.

Chapter-1292: History of Time

Nephis nodded, indicating that she had read the description of the Crown of Twilight. The two of them could have communicated through the [Blessing of Dusk] to discuss how they would approach the conversation with Ananke… but really, there was no need.

The old woman showed no indication of being someone they needed to be wary of. So, they could simply ask.

There was one question that had to be answered above all else, though.

Sunny shifted slightly, then called:

"Grandmother…"

Ananke stirred, as if waking up from a dream, and looked at them with her cloudy eye.

"Yes, my Lord?"

Still uncomfortable with this form of address, Sunny thought for a moment and asked:

"Have you ever heard about… that which was defiled?"

The old woman suddenly froze. Her hand, which was resting on the steering oar, trembled. For a while, nothing but the sound of water splashing against the hull of the ketch could be heard.

It seemed that she wasn't happy to hear that question. However, Sunny and Nephis had no choice but to ask it — they needed to learn everything they could about the assumed goal of this Nightmare.

Eventually, Ananke sighed.

"That which was defiled… I guess you are talking about the Defilement, my Lord."

Sunny's eyes glinted.

"The… Defilement?"

Remembering the horrors of the Southern Campaign, he made a sudden connection. There were three Nightmare Creatures he had slain that bore a similar name — the Defiled Witness, the Defiled Herald, and the Defiled Seeker of Truth.

The first one was the Fallen Devil who led the pack of eyeless beasts. The second was the Corrupted Devil who led the group of desiccated corpses, their mouths sewn shut — Sunny had received the Stifled Scream after that battle.

The third one was the Fallen Titan he had killed by chance during the joint battle against the enormous horde of abominations in East Antarctica, receiving the Mirror of Truth.

Had all of them come from the Tomb of Ariel?

The old woman nodded.

"Yes… the Defilement. I am sorry, my Lord and Lady. I should have known that you would not be aware of these matters. You are Outsiders, after all."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, wondering what she meant.

Ananke remained silent for a few moments, then spoke solemnly:

"...To understand what the Defilement is, you will first need to learn a little about the history of the Great River. I will try to explain as well as I can."

Nephis frowned slightly.

"The history? I am not sure I understand what history a river that flows through time can possess."

The old woman smiled faintly.

"Time within the Tomb of Ariel is unpredictable and convoluted. Sometimes, it flows slowly, while sometimes it flows swiftly. Sometimes, time rises in great storms, or grows stale, or circles forever as a whirlpool. Currents merge and separate, or disappear without a trace. But, nevertheless… for most of us, unless we enter turbulent waters, time always moves. Just like in the outside world.

It is just that our own time is different from the time there."

Noticing a hint of confusion on their faces, Ananke looked thoughtful for a while. Then, she sighed:

"The best way I can explain it is like this — the Great River does indeed flow from the future into the past, but that is only in relation to the outside world. Here, this kind of time is no different from space. However, the River still has a past, a present, and a future in relation to itself. Here, this kind of time is just like the time of the Outside."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"So, one can say that Sunny and I entered the Tomb of Ariel in a distant future — meaning much higher upstream. But one can also say that we entered a month ago? Both distance and days are a measure of time?"

The old woman nodded.

"Indeed. You are wise, my Lady."

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

'That's the second time she calls Nephis wise… zero times for me, though!'

Still, he understood the idea. There were actually two concepts named "time" inside the Tomb of Ariel — one was the flow of the Great River itself, which was prone to all kinds of shenanigans, while the second was no different from the concept of time they were familiar with.

The old woman continued:

"So, the Great River has a history, as well. Or rather, it is us, the River People, who have it. That history… started a long time ago, when the sybils first entered the Tomb of Ariel with their people. There were others, too — all kinds of humans and creatures who came seeking truth, which is said to be hidden at the Estuary."

Her creaky voice grew wistful:

"That was when we, heralds of the Nightmare Spell, came to the Great River as well. I was told that it was a golden age. The sybils established their cities, and powerful Seekers built solitary manors among the waves. They had escaped the end, and lived in peace and prosperity within the Tomb of Ariel."

Sunny found something curious and asked:

"You were told? You weren't there yourself?"

Come to think of it, when Ananke had spoken about the persecution of the followers of Weaver, she had mentioned not experiencing it personally. That statement had sounded rather strange at the time, but there were many other questions that needed to be asked first.

The old woman chuckled.

"Goodness… of course, no. I might look old, but I am not that ancient. No… I was born much later, after Weave was already established. Unlike those who have come from outside, like you, I am Riverborn."

Sunny made a mental note that there was a distinction between the Outsiders and the Riverborn, and continued to listen.

Ananke took a hoarse breath, then said somberly:

"But that golden age… eventually, it came to an end. First, the voices of the gods grew silent, causing the sybils to turn their gazes to the Estuary. And then… then, the Defilement was born."

Chapter-1293: Defilement

Ananke's weathered, wrinkly face grew dark. The old woman lingered for a while before saying:

"The other name for the Defilement is Corruption… a special kind of Corruption that appeared on the Great River and then spread from downstream like a plague. Or rather, was spread."

Nephis leaned forward a little:

"Spread… from downstream?"

The old woman nodded heavily.

"Yes. It is because the Defilement… its origin is the Estuary."

Her cloudy eyes grew distant.

"The Seekers were always trying to reach the Estuary, traveling further and further downstream. But none of them succeeded in finding it. Eventually, they built a city of their own in the far reaches of the past — a city called Verge. Its grandeur could compete with the bustling prosperity of the large cities ruled by the sybils, and from there, they continued their search.

Until, eventually… one of them really managed to enter the Estuary."

The old woman gripped the steering oar as she looked at the vast expanse of the Great River, then continued dully:

"However, what he found there was not the truth, but Corruption. Or perhaps it was the truth that he found that corrupted him. That Seeker became the first of the Defiled, and he brought the Defilement back with him to the Verge. The city of Seekers was consumed by the Defilement, and those consumed by it became twisted and monstrous.

They spread from there like a plague, bringing a great calamity to the River People."

Ananke grew silent, breathing heavily.

Sunny was scowling deeply.

'So that was what happened…'

The hideous truth that the Demon of Dread had hidden in the heart of the Black Pyramid… the first person who learned it was consumed by Corruption as a result. Not only that, but he also infected the rest of the Seekers with it, destroying — or rather, transforming — an entire city into a nightmarish source of the spreading Corruption. Of the Defilement.

…Just what kind of secret had Ariel buried at the dawn of time?

More importantly, was that what Daeron of the Twilight Sea had tried to achieve? Storm the corrupted city of Verge and slay the first witness to the harrowing truth, who was the root of the Defilement?

If so, their task would be a dreadful one.

Nephis seemed to be thinking the same. After pondering for a while, she asked:

"What happened next?"

Ananke shifted on her bench, then sighed.

"Because of the Defilement, the peaceful waters of the Great River became plagued by the Corrupted. The most powerful of them come from the furthest reaches of the past, downstream… as well as from the terrible emptiness of the future, where you have come from, my Lord and Lady. The River People found themselves trapped between the harrowing past and the doomed future, with nowhere to escape.

Of course, they fought against the Defilement and resisted for a while."

She looked away and said bitterly:

"...But they also fought among themselves. That was how we were chased away and forced to escape upstream, braving terrible dangers. Eventually, we lost all contact with those who had exiled us. The last we heard was that many of the sybils had succumbed to the Defilement, and that many of their cities had fallen. Even Twilight, the city of the Serpent King, had been lost.

Now… it is the dusk of the River People. Soon, there won't be any of us left at all."

Sunny felt that he understood what had happened with the people who escaped the end of the world by entering the Tomb of Ariel… most of them had either died or been Corrupted, and the rest would soon follow. That was the fate of the Great River civilization.

So, there were two ways to resolve the conflict of the Nightmare.

They had to either help the destruction of that civilization, or turn the tide by eliminating the source of the spreading Defilement. The latter, of course, would receive much higher praise from the Spell, since it would differ drastically from fate.

He also noted the mention of Twilight… which, as it turned out, was the name of the city King Daeron and his vassals had built. Another interesting point was that Fallen Grace, the city ruled by the last sybil, was situated in the region of the Great River that had already mostly succumbed to the Defilement. Perhaps it was the last human stronghold remaining in the Tomb of Ariel.

'And another thing…'

Ananke had said that there were two places inside the Tomb of Ariel that were much more dreadful and dangerous than all the rest — the far reaches of the future upstream, and the far reaches of the past downstream.

His luck was incredible, as always. Not only had Sunny entered the Great River in one of these harrowing places, but he also seemed destined to journey into the other.

'Great. Simply great…'

What Sunny paid most attention to, however, was a simple question… just how was the Defilement spreading? He did not know a lot about Corruption, but it didn't seem like something that could just happen.

Even Skinwalker could not infect humans with Corruption — instead, it could only infect them with itself. Did the Defilement have a similar nature? He did not think that it did — if all the Nightmare Creatures in the Tomb of Ariel were vessels of the same entity, the first Seeker, they wouldn't be fighting each other.

That was an important distinction.

Looking at Ananke, he asked in a dark tone:

"Grandmother, do you know how the Defilement spreads?"

The old woman shook her head.

"I am sorry, my Lord. I do not… in truth, I've only met a true Defiled once. Weave is situated too far upstream, so while we had to battle Corrupted creatures of the future often, no one from the Verge has ever reached us."

Nephis frowned.

"Except for that one Defiled?"

Ananken nodded.

"...Yes."

The water was sparkling under the sunlight, and the ketch was flying across the waves, traveling further and further into the past. Nephis hesitated for a moment, and then asked:

"What happened when the Defiled appeared?"

The old woman did not answer for a while. Eventually, she raised her head and smiled bitterly.

"The day he appeared... was the day Weave was destroyed."

Her words traveled somberly across the surface of the water, soon disappearing into the wind.

Chapter-1294: Corruption

In the morning, they enjoyed delicious food and fragrant wine from Ananke's wooden box. The old woman herself seemed a little bit more energetic today, but the long conversation had tired her out. She ate very little and returned to the steering oar, looking at the flowing water with a distant expression.

She must have been thinking about her city, Weave, which had been destroyed by the Defiled.

Without having to discuss it, Sunny and Nephis decided to give their kind guide some privacy. They had to digest the many revelations of the past day, anyway.

Sunny was leaning his back on the side of the ketch, cradling a steaming cup of tea in his hands. Nephis was by his side, looking at the sky.

After some time had passed in comfortable silence, he used the Blessing of Dusk to ask:

[There is one thing I don't understand.]

She shifted slightly and turned to look at him. Sunny was suddenly painfully aware of how close they were... his pale face was reflecting in the calm depths of her striking grey eyes.

He sighed.

[She said that Weave was destroyed. And yet, she is taking us there. Why?]

Nephis contemplated for a few moments.

[Ananke survived the destruction, so more people could have

survived as well. If not, it would be to scavenge for supplies for the journey ahead. We will see when we get there.]

Sunny took a sip from his cup, enjoying the warmth of the freshly brewed tea. The ketch was swaying gently, and the view was heavenly. It was really hard to believe that they were inside a Nightmare.

[What do you think about what we've learned so far?]

Neph's face darkened a little. She looked away and shrugged.

[...The situation is better than I thought. It seems we have a clear enemy, at least. More than that, not all of the Great River is as dangerous as our starting point. I was wary… a little bit… thinking that every Nightmare Creature here is like the Azure Serpent, the Black Turtle, and that horrid butterfly. But it doesn't seem that way.]

She paused, then added somberly:

[However, I am concerned about the others. We all came from the same moment in time, so they should have been sent to the same region of the Great River. Why is there no sign of them?]

Sunny looked down with a grim expression. He shared that concern.

Cassie, Effie, Kai, Jet, and even Mordret… where were they? None of them were easy to kill. He firmly believed that his friends were still alive, somewhere out there.

Or at least, he wanted to.

[...But it is strange, isn't it?]

Nephis glanced at him with a silent question.

He frowned.

[The way we entered the Nightmare. As Masters, we get to keep our own bodies, true… but we are still supposed to replace someone from that region and era. Whose place have you and I taken? From what Ananke told us, there were not supposed to be any humans further

than Weave. It doesn't make sense.]

Nephis seemed taken aback a little. Of course, her reserved expression had not changed even a little bit — however, Sunny knew her well enough to see that she was stumped.

[You're right. It is strange.]

He remained silent for a few moments, thinking. Could it be that the Spell had failed to find suitable hosts for the other members of the cohort that far upstream, and so sent them someplace else?

Eventually, he shook his head and asked:

[Regardless. That Defilement… how exactly does it spread? There has not been a single instance of a human from the waking world succumbing to Corruption… as far as I know. What really happened to that Seeker in the Estuary?]

Nephis did not answer, looking at the sky. After a while, she shook her head.

[You are wrong. Countless humans from our world have become Corrupted. Every Sleeper that fails the First Nightmare turns into a Nightmare Creature… isn't it the same thing?]

Sunny tilted his head, stunned by that simple comparison. Nephis was right, numerous people had turned into Nightmare Creatures in the waking world already. It was just that none of them had been of a higher Rank than Dormant… because the trials of the Spell killed them long before they could set foot on the path of Ascension.

While she was thinking, Nephis suddenly added in a contemplative tone:

[As for the Seeker who learned the truth of the Estuary and brought Corruption to the Great River… actually, it reminds me of something you told me once.]

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

[Me?]

She nodded.

[It was a long time ago, on the Forgotten Shore. When we were enthralled by the Soul Devouring Tree, you told me about the Lineage Memory you had found in its branches. In its description… wasn't it said that the loathsome Thieving Bird had gone mad after seeing a glimpse of "unknown" frozen in the depths of Weaver's eye?]

He shivered, suddenly consumed by an ominous premonition.

[What of it?]

Nephis shrugged.

[It just reminds me of that Seeker. The Thieving Bird must have been a creature of dreadful power, considering that it managed to steal a daemon's eye. Still, its mind was destroyed by one glimpse at what was hidden in Weaver's pupil. The Seeker saw something that he shouldn't have, and became corrupted. Maybe… he brought the forbidden knowledge back with him.

Maybe that is how the Defilement spreads — people learning the truth of the Estuary.]

Sunny grew quiet, thinking about what she said. The description of the Drop of Ichor indeed stated that the Vile Thieving Bird had gone mad after seeing the reflection of the unknown in Weaver's eye. Was it perhaps another way of saying that it had become corrupted?

And if so, had something similar happened to the First Seeker? Was the truth buried by Ariel in the heart of the Black Pyramid the same truth Weaver had witnessed once, and which became forever frozen in the depths of his… or her… eyes?

'You wanted to be free of the truth, so you didn't deserve it…'

He remained silent for a while, then sighed.

[Well, that's great. Now, we don't only have to be wary of Nightmare Creatures, we even have to be careful about what we learn. Damnation… you do know that I am a very curious guy, don't you, Neph?]

She looked at him, lingered for a bit, and smiled.

[Oh... I do. You are indeed a very curious guy… Lost from Light, who was born from the shadows, rightful heir of…]

Sunny opened his eyes wide and hurriedly dismissed the mental connection of the [Blessing of Dusk].

"Hey, hey!"

Nephis leaned on the side of the ketch and laughed softly.

"What?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again and gritted his teeth.

"...Can you maybe forget that? Forever?"

Nephis looked away with white sparks dancing in her eyes.

"Can I? Well, I don't know. I have a very good memory…"

Sunny stared at her for a while, then scoffed.

"Admit it, though. You thought it was a bit cool, didn't you? I bet you did. Like you thought Mongrel was…"

Neph's face suddenly grew still.

"I… absolutely did not."

He grinned.

"Sure, sure. Ah, but I have a good memory too. What was it that you said in that nightclub in NQSC? If I recall correctly…"

Nephis closed her eyes and yawned.

"Ah, I am so tired. I think I need to rest now."

Sunny laughed.

"Really? Alright, then. Rest well…"

Chapter-1295: No One Knows

While Nephis was pretending to sleep, Sunny moved to the stern of the ketch and looked at Ananke, who seemed to have paid no attention to their conversation.

Sensing his attention, however, she turned slightly and asked:

"Yes, my Lord?"

He hesitated for a few moments.

"I… wanted to ask you about Weaver."

The old woman smiled slightly, as if uplifted by his question.

"What would you like to know?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment. What didn't he want to know? Daemons were surrounded by mystery, and while he slowly accumulated a lot of knowledge about them — much more knowledge than an average human in the ancient times of the Dream Realm had, most likely — there were still wide gaps in it.

The problem was that Ananke was not really a person from the Dream Realm. She had been born in the Tomb of Ariel and spent her life in isolation from the outside world. Still… she was a priestess of the Nightmare Spell. She had to know many things, even if some of that knowledge had undoubtedly been twisted as a result of becoming religious doctrine.

So, he was unsure how much he would be able to learn from the old woman.

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well… for starters, was Weaver a man or a woman?"

He was really tired of stumbling over his words every time he tried to say something about... them.

Ananke chuckled.

"No one knows. Weaver was a master of lies, after all — so, you should take anything that is known about the Demon of Fate with a grain of salt. Weaver was the firstborn of the Unknown. His — or her — domain was fate. And just like fate, Weaver was fickle, inevitable, and terrifying. Despite not possessing dreadful battle power, unlike some other daemons, the Demon of Fate was feared the most."

Sunny was not surprised. He couldn't imagine a more frightening enemy than someone whose weapon was fate itself. That said… he wasn't sure whether Weaver had been able to control fate, or simply perceive it. The latter seemed more probable, even if everyone had been convinced otherwise.

Was that one of Weaver's lies?

He inhaled deeply.

"Who was the Unknown, then?"

The old woman smiled.

"...I don't know."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Well, that is not surprising. There is a reason why that being is called the Unknown, after all… actually, no. Unknown is just the substitute word the Spell uses for the runes it refuses to translate. So, the progenitor of the daemons is called something else.

The priesthood of the Nightmare Spell probably started calling that being Unknown for the same reason I did, considering that they are the carriers of the Spell, as well. Or rather, of an ancient, rudimentary version of the Spell.'

He shook his head dejectedly.

"For someone who has chosen to dedicate their lives to serving Weaver, suffering all kinds of mistreatment and persecution, you and your people don't seem to know a lot about the being you serve."

Sunny was afraid that Ananke would be offended by his remark, but she simply shook her head.

"We might not know a lot… but we know all we need. We know that when the gods and the daemons started their cursed war, Weaver was the only one who refused to participate."

Her weathered face turned somber.

"...And when the flames of that war spread, bringing doom and destruction to all, Weaver was the only one who offered us all a path to salvation."

Sunny glanced at Nephis, who could certainly hear what they were talking about. Wondering what she thought about all that, he asked:

"That path to salvation… is the Nightmare Spell?"

Ananke nodded.

"Indeed. The Nightmare Spell was created by Weaver and entrusted to us in order to save us all from the doom that Demons brought upon."

And there it was. A proclamation of a hidden truth that Sunny had tentatively considered before, but was never really sure of. That the purpose of the Spell was not cruel and sinister in nature, but instead fundamentally benevolent... albeit still cruel.

However…

If that was what Weaver had told people like Ananke… could that truth really be trusted?

She had just described the Demon of Fate as a master of lies, after all, and said that everything about Weaver should be taken with a grain of salt.

Nevertheless, Ananke seemed to believe in the benevolence of the Nightmare Spell wholeheartedly. That was… rather strange.

'How should I put it…'

The old woman, despite her age and wisdom, seemed a little bit… naive. Sunny and Nephis were not the worst people from the waking world by far, but even they had briefly contemplated attacking and killing her after discovering the ketch. Yet she had never been on guard against them, instead treating them with utmost sincerity.

Her unwavering trust in Weaver was just the same.

He hesitated for a long time before speaking again:

"Grandmother… I don't mean to offend you, but hasn't that doom come already? Where is the salvation you were promised?"

Holding the steering oar, Ananke smiled softly.

"Why… it is right here, my Lord. It is you, the Children of Weaver."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, his expression incredulous. The old woman chuckled.

"You might have misunderstood me a little. When I spoke of salvation, I did not mean that my elders, who had accepted the mission of caring for the Nightmare Spell from Weaver, hoped to save themselves. The Doom War… it threatened to destroy all life — all humans, and all beings — everywhere, forever. So, what they really wanted to save… was the future."

She paused for a few moments, took a shaky breath, and added:

"It might be strange to say this while sailing into the past, but the future… it is still ahead, and so, it can still be saved."

Sunny pursed his lips. The Dream Realm was already a dead world, with only Nightmare Creatures populating its hellish expanse. And now, the Spell had even infected Earth with the same plague that had destroyed it, forcibly pulling more humans there… in an attempt to do what?

He sighed.

"How exactly are we supposed to save the future? We can't even save ourselves."

The old woman shook her head.

"That is for you to know, my Lord. Although I am a caretaker of the Nightmare Spell, I am not a person it was meant for. All I can do… is help those chosen, like you… brave the thorny path. As much as I can, with what little power I have."

She smiled.

"Even if it's just for a short while. That is enough for me."

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then rubbed his face.

'Well, isn't that convenient…'

Chapter-1296: Doom War

Sunny was not sure that he was buying what Ananke believed… but at the same time, he couldn't completely discard it.

'Damn Weaver…'

Just why did the creator of the Spell have to be a nebulous and elusive creature — not only surrounded in mystery, but also obsessed with lies? Could there be anyone more untrustworthy? Even though Sunny had inherited Weaver's forbidden Lineage, wore Weaver's Mask, and had a high affinity to fate, which was Weaver's Domain… he still knew close to nothing about the Demon of Fate.

Where had Weaver come from? Who hid behind the fearsome black mask? What motives had guided them? What goals had they pursued?

He shook his head with resignation and looked at Ananke, frowning.

'Whatever. If I can't learn about Weaver, I should at least learn everything else.'

Sunny collected his thoughts before asking the next question.

"Grandmother, you said that the purpose of the Nightmare Spell is to save the future from the doom of the great war between the daemons and the gods. To be honest… I am not entirely sure what that really means. What exactly is that doom? What made the war so terrible?"

The old woman gazed at the flowing expanse of the Great River, lingered for a moment, and sighed.

"It was indeed terrible. Of course, I have not experienced the horror of those days myself. What I do know was passed down to me from my elders, who had… granted, they escaped the war before the end

came, so even they didn't know how and why the true devastation happened."

She paused to catch her breath, then continued in her creaky voice:

"No one really knows what resentment pushed the daemons to rise against the gods. It happened soon after the Demon of Desire escaped her chains. The youngest among them, the Demon of Destiny, called upon his siblings to wage war against the heavens… five answered his call, and only the Demon of Fate refused."

Ananke moved the steering oar a little, her frail hand as dark as the polished wood.

"Many blamed the daemons for everything terrible that happened. But, truly, things weren't going well long before their rebellion. Most of the gods had grown… distant, and people quarrelled with each other, forgetting the days when everything stood together against the Corruption. Humans fought against humans, and against other noble creatures.

Followers of War burned the temples of Shadow, and their empire spread, consuming many weaker realms."

Her cloudy eyes were distant, as if the old woman was imagining the wide world that she had never seen or known. She slowly shook her head.

"So, maybe, the great war was merely the result, and not the cause of the end. In any case, the six Demons assembled vast armies and led them against the gods. What was different about that war… was that they were not immediately defeated. After all, there were many lesser deities, but none of them were as feared as the daemons — let alone if six of them united.

Others joined their cause, and even the great gods couldn't defeat such an enemy with ease."

The old woman trembled.

"The war was furious and merciless. Many realms had become battlefields and were devoured by flames. But… the worst was still to

come. Because instead of coming to a conclusion, the war only continued to grow fiercer.

Those loyal to the gods took up arms, and in response, the Demons recruited more allies — mortal champions who had suffered the tyranny of the Empire, ancient creatures that had been banished into the darkest corners of the Underworld, and everyone else who bore deep grudges against the divine… even the harrowing nephilim.

Utter madness was unleashed, and soon, there was no place untouched by the war. Everywhere turned into the battlefield."

Ananke glanced at the flowing waters of the Great River and remained silent for a while. Eventually, she said:

"Nowhere was safe. The forests burned, the fields turned to deserts, the rivers dried up. A passing blow from the fighting deities could destroy entire cities. Over time, countless humans were displaced or lost their lives.

That was when we started calling it the Doom War, believing that it would become the end of everything… it was also when Weaver created the Nightmare Spell, and gifted it to us mortals."

Sunny suddenly remembered the Forgotten Shore, and the ruin that had befallen that land when the shining figure fell from the sky. Was that radiant creature one of the soldiers in the dreadful war between the six daemons and the six gods? Was it, perhaps, one of the nephilim?

Or… an actual angel?

If what had happened on the Forgotten Shore was happening all across the Dream Realm, then it was no surprise that the ancient humans there saw it as the end of the world.

Ananke sighed.

"Weaver offered us a path to salvation, but… back then, the Demon of Fate was despised by all — the followers of the gods, the followers of the daemons, and even those who did not want anything to do with the war. We, the priests of the Nightmare Spell, were despised

as well. Few listened to us… still, some did. The Nightmare Spell was alluring, after all, even in its infant state."

Sunny tilted his head.

"...Alluring?"

The old woman nodded.

"Of course! It gave its carriers so many abilities. The ability to possess Memories and Echoes, the ability to instantly be able to enter your Soul Sea, awaken your Aspect, be guided on the path of Ascension… the Nightmare Spell promised people who desperately wished for power means to defend themselves."

'Huh…'

So, Weaver was not only the most insidious Demon, but also a devious salesman. The Nightmare Spell was packed with all kinds of boons that desperate people would find irresistible — boons that the humans of the waking world took for granted, since they had nothing to compare them to. No wonder the Spell spread like a plague despite the contemptible reputation of its creator.

"So, what happened then?"

Ananke lingered for a moment.

"The priests of the Nightmare Spell helped it spread, trying their best to bestow its gifts on new carriers. That… was when my elders entered the Tomb of Ariel. We never learned what happened after we left. The war must have turned even more harrowing, somehow, and neither side emerged victorious. Instead, everyone was destroyed. Even the gods perished."

She hesitated.

"...I heard that more Outsiders appeared after the voices of the gods grew silent. Maybe they brought news to the Tomb of Ariel. But by then, we were already chased far upstream, so we never met them."

The old woman's voice grew wistful as she said:

"By now, most of them must have been consumed by the Defilement. My Lord… perhaps you can learn more if you speak to Dusk of Fallen Grace. She is one of the sybils, after all. She must know more than a humble exile like me does…"

Chapter-1297: Where Nightmares Come From

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking…

There was a lot to think about.

Although Neph's eyes were closed, he could tell that she was thoughtful, as well. The history of the Dream Realm, which they could only guess before, was revealed in front of them with stark clarity.

Of course, Ananke had not witnessed all these events herself. But the tales she relayed were passed down to her from people who actually had.

'No wonder…'

No wonder Mordret had told him that the knowledge and experience Awakened brought back from their Nightmares were perhaps more important than the power and Abilities they gained. And that Legacy clans, especially those ruled by the Sovereigns, were very particular about which Seeds their scions challenged.

Both Valor and Song must have accumulated a great deal of knowledge… however, that knowledge was not something just anyone could access. Even Nephis, who had been adopted into the great clan, did not seem privy to most of their secrets yet.

That was only natural. After all, knowledge was the origin of power.

…According to Weaver.

And Anvil would not trust her with power until she had proven herself.

He lingered for a few moments, then looked to his right, where Ananke's mask still lay on the wooden deck. Stretching his hand, he picked it up and stared at the fearsome, demonic face.

Sunny could not glimpse anything about the mask. He did not even know whether it was a Memory or a simple piece of carved wood.

Glancing at Ananke, he pointed to the mask and asked:

"Is this a Divine Memory?"

She remained silent for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"No, my Lord. This one is merely Sacred… a lesser facsimile of the true Mask of Weaver. It is a part of the ceremonial garb that we, priests and priestesses of the Nightmare Spell, wear — both to escape the gaze of our pursuers and to follow in the footsteps of our benefactor, the Demon of Fate. The more accomplished a priest was, the higher rank Memory they would be bestowed."

Ananke looked away with a faint smile.

"My mother, whom I inherited this Memory from, was one of the few who received a mask of the Sacred Rank, which was the highest of honors. As for Divine Memories of the Mask of Weaver… I've never seen these holy relics. There were only ever two of them, entrusted personally to the first two who were chosen by the Demon of Fate — the High Priest and the High Priestess of the Nightmare Spell."

Sunny studied the surface of the mask some more. After a short stretch of silence, he followed his whim and asked:

"Does it have the [Where is my eye?] enchantment?"

He was curious if Ananke, as the Priestess of the Spell, could teach him how to gaze at the tapestry of fate without dying.

The old woman looked at him with a surprised expression.

"Where is my eye? No… no, it doesn't. But… if I may be so bold as to ask, how do you know the name of that enchantment, my Lord? This Sacred Memory of mine only possesses two. It was only the two holy

Masks that possessed a third — and even then, very few ever learned about it."

Sunny hesitated for a long time, then sighed and summoned Weaver's Mask. Soon, a fearsome mask of polished black wood appeared in his left hand, identical to the one he was holding in his right.

Ananke's eyes widened slightly.

"M—my Lord… is that?"

He nodded.

"Yes. Ah… before you start assuming things, I am not a Priest of the Nightmare Spell, nor am I a chosen of the Demon of Fate. It's just that I found this thing a few years ago in a godforsaken pit of a cursed city. I've been stumbling on various traces of Weaver while traveling the Dream Realm, so… I guess I am curious about him. Or her. Or whatever Weaver was."

Sunny considered telling her about Blood Weave and the phalanx of the daemon in question, which he had swallowed in the Ebony Tower, but decided against it. He didn't want to give the old woman a heart attack, or put strange thoughts in her head. Her reverent attitude was already rather uncomfortable.

Ananke remained silent for a few moments, looking at the mask — and Sunny — with that same reverence. Then, she sighed softly.

"My Lord… was this Memory helpful to you on your journey?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Helpful? Well… I guess it was. It saved my life a few times. Ah, but it also almost killed me a few times. In any case, I probably wouldn't be standing here without it."

The old woman smiled.

"...Then it was fate that guided you to it, and me to you. By Weaver's grace."

Sunny looked at her somberly. He didn't like being reminded of just how helpless he was against fate. Neither did he like the idea of being a marionette for a long-dead daemon.

But he couldn't really dispute what Ananke had said. First, because it was pointless to argue faith with logic. Second… because he wasn't sure that his logic was sound.

Who was to say that the damned Demon of Fate had not really arranged for various things to happen in the distant future?

'This is… distressing.'

He let out a heavy sigh, then dismissed his Weaver's Mask and put the other one on the bench near Ananke.

"You shouldn't leave it lying on the deck. It is a gift from your mother, after all."

The old woman gently took the wooden mask and placed it on her lap.

"Thank you, my Lord. You are wise."

Sunny furtively glanced at her and hid a smile.

'Ha! I got one, too.'

Then, he looked at the beautiful vista of the Great River and said:

"So, when your elders entered the Tomb of Ariel, most of the priesthood of the Nightmare Spell remained outside, splintered in order to convert more carriers during the Doom War?"

Ananke simply nodded.

"Yes."

She seemed down, so Sunny suddenly wanted to encourage her. He thought for a few moments, and then shrugged.

"Well, they've done a great job. The Nightmare Spell outlived both

the daemons and the gods. In the future, it is nearly all-powerful. Ah, by the way… you said that it was very alluring to people even at the start. But what about the price? Weren't they afraid of dying in the Nightmares?"

The old woman looked at him with a hint of confusion.

"Nightmares, my Lord? What do you mean? Why would people be afraid of dying in their dreams?"

At that moment, Nephis opened her eyes and turned her head, looking at Ananke silently. Sunny turned, too, his gaze becoming sharp.

'Does she not know what a Nightmare is?'

He lingered for a moment, then asked:

"Did the Spell not put people through trials, way back then?"

Ananke touched her white hair, then shook her head.

"Trials? No… I've never heard of anything like that."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Now, that's new… why would Nightmares only exist in our time? That doesn't make any sense.'

Nephis seemed to share his thoughts. She remained silent for a moment, then suddenly leaned forward and asked:

"Grandmother… I have a question, then. Where exactly does the "nightmare" in the Nightmare Spell come from?"

Sunny blinked.

'What a strange question.'

The old woman stared at them in bewilderment. After a while, she said:

"That is what Weaver named it. The Demon of Fate must have had a

reason, but it is not for us to know what that reason was. The Nightmare Spell… it is just what it has always been called."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other.

The Spell was always very particular with its words, and Weaver must have been the same. There was no way that the grand creation of the nebulous daemon had been named without much thought.

But what was the meaning of that name?

Neither of them knew, and Ananke didn't seem to know either.

'Damn Weaver...'

Chapter-1298: Noble Cause

Sunny left the old woman alone and returned to where Nephis was resting, full of thought. He had not received all the answers he wanted from Ananke, but at the same time, he learned a lot… maybe even too much.

'Ah, I don't know.'

There was too much information, all of it fragmented, ambiguous, and confusing. Not only that, but he was not even sure that it could be trusted.

In any case, many mysteries he had never hoped to solve were resolved now. Like the destruction of the Forgotten Shore — it had become collateral damage in the war between the daemons and the gods. Or the identity of the nameless prisoner of the ruined cathedral — it was one of the first two apostles chosen by Weaver to tend to and spread the Nightmare Spell... whoever these apostles had been.

Sunny even had more context for why the followers of War God had been destroying the temples of Shadow God in his First Nightmare, and what empire Auro of the Nine was a soldier of.

Still… he had even more questions now.

Like always.

'...My head hurts.'

He was saying these words a lot in this Nightmare.

Sunny sighed, then looked at Nephis.

"What do you think?"

With how obsessed she was with destroying the Spell, the revelations

about its origin and presumed purpose had to have shaken her… and maybe even her conviction.

But Nephis simply shrugged.

"Makes sense."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Huh?"

She looked at him and remained silent for a moment.

"That the Nightmare Spell has a purpose, and that its purpose is tied somehow to the destruction of the Dream Realm. However, that doesn't change anything."

Sunny leaned back and studied her calm face. She seemed as composed as ever.

"So, knowing that doesn't change anything for you?"

Nephis looked at the sky.

"Why would it? It is still hateful. It is still the cause of indescribable misery… that of countless people, and my own. Salvation? Future? To me, it sounds like the Spell was designed to destroy countless futures for the sake of a future that Weaver envisioned, and fuel it with the lives of those like us, who have never asked to be a part of Weaver's schemes."

Sunny frowned, then glanced at the frail figure of Ananke. Luckily, it didn't seem like she had heard them.

Nephis gritted her teeth.

"If a burglar comes into your home, kills your family, and takes everything you have from you… does it really matter if the burglar intends to use the spoils for a noble cause? Would you hate him less?"

Sunny sighed.

…He could see her point, too.

"I guess it depends."

Nephis looked at him darkly.

"Depends? On what?"

He lingered for a few moments, collecting his thoughts.

"On the nature of the relationship between the Dream Realm and our world. How separate are they, exactly? Would Corruption have spread to the waking world eventually, even without the Spell, or not? Things like that. Ah, sorry… I seem to have lost track of the metaphor."

She stared at him for a while, then turned away with a scowl.

Sunny winced. His argument was reasonable… but humans weren't. That included him, as well.

If someone murdered Rain to save an entire neighborhood, he would have hated them all the same.

He did not say anything else, looking somberly at the Great River. Eventually, it was Nephis who broke the silence. Her voice was even:

"I am curious about something else, though."

Sunny glanced at her and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She frowned slightly.

"What happened after Ananke's elders entered the Tomb of Ariel and lost contact with the outside world? How did the war escalate even further? What could have happened to cause both sides to be destroyed?"

Neph's eyes glinted with white radiance.

"And what role did the Spell play in the conclusion of the war? How

has it grown to its current state?"

Sunny felt a sudden chill as he remembered the description of Bone Weave…

[...despised and hunted by both sides, Weaver disappeared. No one knew where Weaver went and what they did… until it was too late.]

With white light burning in her eyes, Nephis looked at him and asked:

"Did you ever think that, maybe, the Nightmare Spell is not only responsible for the devastation of our world, but also for the destruction of the Dream Realm?"

He remained silent for a while, his expression troubled.

Then, Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Damn it, Neph. You do remember what Flaw I have, right? Please don't subject me to avalanches of questions like that. To answer all of them… I don't know, I have no idea, I have no clue, there's no way to tell…"

Nephis blinked a couple of times, then opened her eyes wide and covered her mouth with a hand.

"Oh! S—sorry…"

Sunny continued nonchalantly:

"...that is a mystery to me, who knows? And yes, I did consider it before. There, all done."

In the awkward silence that followed, he smiled and said:

"Anyway. All this talking made me hungry. Let's eat…"

***

Sunny felt spoiled eating Ananke's home-cooked food, so much so that the weight he had lost on the dark island was slowly returning.

The old woman herself still ate like a bird, but she seemed to be in a better state than before. Her hands were shaking less, and she remained lucid for longer periods of time before having to rest.

The ketch continued to move downstream, devouring distance with great speed. Nothing had attacked them yet — perhaps because they had left the most dangerous region of the Great River, perhaps because Ananke knew how to navigate the flowing waters to avoid danger.

It was probably both.

The day came to an end, followed by a peaceful night.

Sunny spent most of that time quietly working on mastering the fourth step of Shadow Dance. The dire enlightenment he had gained in the battle against the Azure Serpent was steadily leading him to success.

In the morning, they enjoyed a scrumptious breakfast, and then… nothing changed.

The journey continued, and the waters of the Great River remained the same.

The old ketch continued to travel into the past.

Chapter-1299: Nameless Things

A few more days passed in blissful idleness. Sunny continued concentrating on Shadow Dance, not ready yet to learn more from Ananke — the information she had shared with them was already vexing enough, and he was struggling to parse through all of its many implications.

He also resumed his habit of studying the weave of the Estuary Key, even though it still remained a complete mystery to him.

After hesitating for a while, Sunny turned to the old woman for help, but there was no result. Although she was a priestess of the Nightmare Spell and a follower of the Demon of Fate, she was not a weaver herself. Sunny knew more about Weaver's sorcery than Ananke did.

…Which was not to say that she did not know anything about sorcery at all.

After spending several days in the ketch, Sunny and Nephis noticed two strange things about the swift vessel and its owner.

The first one concerned the ketch itself. Its sails were always full of wind, pushing the boat across the shining surface of the Great River with enviable speed. Which was not too strange in and of itself, if not for the fact that this speed was too constant and stable. It also did not seem as though the direction and strength of the wind ever changed — or rather, they never changed around the ketch.

They did, however, change some distance away from it, creating an eerie situation where the waters where the wooden sailboat passed were different from the rest of the world.

Not only that, but Ananke also never manipulated the sails in any way to help them catch the wind.

And nothing ever attacked them.

Both Sunny and Nephis knew, of course, that the ketch was not a mundane boat. It was obviously enchanted in some way, they just did not know how. There were no runes carved into its surface and no sophisticated runic patterns like on the Chain Breaker. There was no spellweave hidden within the old wood either.

Eventually, they were defeated by curiosity and asked Ananke directly.

That was how Sunny learned that, while the old woman was not a weaver, she was still a sorceress. However, the sorcery she used did not belong to the Demon of Fate, nor was it the runic sorcery created by Hope.

Instead, it was the ancient sorcery upon which Hope's runic magic was based — the sorcery of Names.

Noticing their bewilderment, the old woman chuckled.

"My Lord and Lady… don't look too surprised. I am not some kind of powerful Shaper. I was just taught a few simple Names and Phrases by my mother, enough to sail the Great River and provide for myself."

Sunny and Nephis were still stunned. It was not every day that they met a practitioner of an entirely new system of sorcery.

In fact, Sunny had only ever met two sorcerers… himself and Noctis. Noctis had known a great deal about True Names of things and how to invoke them, but his was a more sophisticated kind of magic, which relied on inscribing the Names with runes instead of speaking them directly.

Nephis had met a few more, considering that she was acquainted with the forgemasters of Clan Valor. She had told him that the members of the Valor family often received Aspects tied to crafting, which was how they were able to create powerful Memories. However, the family had accumulated plenty of knowledge of runic sorcery, as well.

The cage that Sunny and Cassie had almost died in during their imprisonment in the Night Temple was proof.

Ananke tilted her head curiously.

"Are there no Shapers in the future? Well… makes sense. We were a dying breed even before the war. And with the gifts of the Nightmare Spell, no one would need to seek power in such an antiquated and obsolete art."

She lingered for a few moments, and then pointed to the sails.

"It is rather simple, really. I just invoked the Name of the wind, the Name of moving forward across water, and the name of the sail, then put them together into a Verse. I also used the Name of concealment and the Name of being hidden from predators.

Of course, most of that was only possible because this old ketch of mine is imbued with a True Name of its own, which served as an anchor for the entire Verse."

Ananke sighed.

"It is also most of my repertoire. True Names… were never meant to be spoken by mortals. So, one has to possess innate talent in order to master even the easiest of them. My talent is not too good."

Sunny looked at her intently and asked:

"Is it very important for the ketch to have a True Name of its own?"

The old woman nodded with a smile.

"Of course. Without a True Name, a thing does not have… pull. It is tenuous and slippery, so sorcery can't stick to it that well. Oh, at least that was how it was explained to me when I was a child. A nameless thing won't be influenced as much, but it will also be unable to exert much influence in turn… that is a rule that goes beyond sorcery, as well."

Sunny grew silent, contemplating her words. Ananke, meanwhile, looked at them with a strangely wistful emotion in her cloudy eyes.

"...Actually, I was going to teach you how to control the ketch, my Lord and Lady. If you are willing, of course… since even I was able to master these few Names, at least one of you will surely succeed."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other. Her expression was thoughtful, while his was full of greed.

'Ah, damn it…'

He was burning with curiosity and insatiable avarice. Learn a few sorcerous words? Of course, he was willing!

However, Sunny had to reluctantly pull himself back. He would indeed love to learn a tiny bit of the Word sorcery, but his resources were already spread thin. Apart from Shadow Dance, he also had to study weaving. His combat skills and Aspect powers all required attention, too. Becoming distracted by a shiny new toy was only going to slow down his progress.

Plus, if Nephis learned these Names from Ananke, he could always ask her to teach him in the future.

Sunny sighed, then forced himself to say:

"...I'll decline, for now."

His heart was in pain.

Nephis looked at him silently, then turned to Ananke and bowed slightly.

"Please teach me, Grandmother."

The old woman nodded with satisfaction.

"It will be an honor, my Lady."

And that was how the first strange thing they noticed was resolved.

The second, though…

The second had to do with Ananke herself.

It seemed that the further downstream they traveled, the more the old woman changed.

Chapter-1300: Riverborn

When Sunny and Nephis first met Ananke, both were concerned about the frail old woman. She just looked too ancient and weak, ready to snap like a twig. Her tan skin was thin and transparent like oil paper, her cloudy eyes teary and dull, her gaunt figure so small that it seemed to be drowning in the black folds of her dark mantle.

They were not sure that the old woman could survive another peaceful day, let alone a long and perilous journey across the Great River.

However, as the days went by, their worries were proven wrong. Old Ananke continued to cling to life… in fact, her condition seemed to be improving little by little. She had more energy now, could remain fully lucid for longer periods of time, and even regained some of her appetite.

At first, Sunny thought that it was simply the result of finally having hope again after waiting for the two of them for gods knew how long, as well as eating better. But as more time passed, the difference became too obvious to be explained by mere inspiration.

Ananke… was definitely changing.

Her hands gradually stopped shaking, and her grip on the steering oar became firmer. Her cloudy eyes regained some of their former sharpness. She wasn't hunching as much anymore, and her voice was not as weak and creaky as before.

She did not grow tired as quickly as she had at the start, and the long periods of silence where she seemed to doze off with her eyes open happened less and less frequently, until ceasing altogether.

It was as though Ananke was slowly growing younger.

Sunny had to admit that he was not just imagining things when he opened his eyes one day to notice that there were suddenly a few black strands in her long, snow-white hair.

'What is going on?'

He looked at Ananke for a few moments, then lowered his gaze to the powerful current of the Great River. Which flowed into the past…

Nephis, who had been practicing the Names the old woman taught her — to no result, for now — noticed that he was awake and carefully pulled on the sleeve of his tunic. Then, she silently glanced at Ananke and back.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

'Me? Why do I have to ask? Asking a woman about her age, does she think I like courting death?!'

Well, to be honest… his track record indeed suggested that he did.

He sighed, threw an indignant glance at Nephis, and approached the old woman while secretly studying her face and thin frame. There was no denying it — Ananke looked much more hale than she had before. She could not be called young by any means, still, but neither could she be called decrepit or ancient.

Sunny lingered for a second or two, then asked politely:

"Grandmother… can I ask you something?"

The old woman smiled at him kindly.

"Of course, my Lord."

'Now what am I supposed to say?'

Sunny took a deep breath, then just came clean with it.

"It might sound weird, but… are you, by any chance... getting younger?"

Ananke looked at him with a startled expression.

Sunny coughed in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, it's just that… I noticed that you look better… ah, I don't mean that you didn't look well before…"

The old woman suddenly chuckled.

"No, no. It is me who needs to apologize, my Lord. I just… have never met someone entirely from outside the Tomb of Ariel before. That is why it is not easy for me to account for the fact that you might not know some things that are common sense here."

She shook her head, and then said gently:

"Yes, this body of mine is indeed getting younger. It is because we are moving downstream."

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, perplexed. After a few moments of silence, he furtively studied her slender figure, while she openly studied his.

Eventually, Nephis said:

"But… it doesn't seem like Sunny and I changed?"

Wouldn't they have become toddlers by now?

Ananke nodded, her expression slightly sad.

"Of course not. It is because you are Outsiders, while I am Riverborn. The Outsiders are not beholden to the flow of the Great River, since they have come from outside it. They are free to roam it as they wish, traveling any distance. That is why they are also called Pilgrims."

She smiled.

"But we, Riverborn, are different. Since we were born inside the Tomb of Ariel, we are beholden to the flow of time within it. We can only travel as far as our lifespans allow… and even then, the only direction that is allowed to us is upstream. We are chained to the

stretch of the Great River where we come from."

Sunny looked at her in bewilderment, struggling to imagine what such a life would look like.

"Wait, wait… how does it even work?"

At the same time, Nephis asked:

"So, you grow older when you move upstream, and grow younger when you move downstream? That is… in relation to the place where you were born?"

Ananke looked between the two of them helplessly, then finally decided to answer Neph's question first and nodded.

"Indeed."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then suddenly opened his eyes wide.

"Wait, does that mean that as long as you stay in place, you are… immortal?"

Ananke sighed softly.

"Our bodies will not age, my Lord. That is not the same as being immortal."

She looked at the sparkling expanse of the Great River wistfully.

"...Actually, we Riverborn don't usually live that long. At least not in Weave. Life here is full of hardship, and the waters are dangerous. Since we live close to the desolate future, there are many Corrupted coming from upstream… all of them immune to the flow of time.

Things were fine when we had many Outsiders among us — our elders — but as their number dwindled, it grew harder and harder to provide for ourselves and defend the city."

The old woman's face grew dark.

"After all, it is not easy to fight an enemy that can attack and retreat

freely while you lack the ability to pursue it. Still… we managed. Life in Weave might not have been easy or opulent, but it was blissful. At least mine was."

Ananke fell silent, a faint smile on her lips.

'Now wait a minute...'

Sunny tilted his head and, unable to control himself, blurted out:

"Then, Grandmother… no, Ananke… how old are you, really?"

'Ah! What am I doing!'

The old woman looked at him and chuckled.

"Me? Actually… among the River People, I am considered to be quite a young woman."

He froze.

Nephis froze, too.

"Y—young?"

Ananke nodded earnestly.

"Of course! I am barely two hundred years old…"

Chapter-1301: Fourth Mastery

The Outsiders and the Riverborn… the revelation of the difference between them was enough to boggle Sunny's mind. He had already been prepared to encounter all kinds of bizarre situations inside the Tomb of Ariel, but what Ananke told them sent him for a loop.

It was because Sunny had only considered the odd perils of the Great River in relation to himself, not in relation to a whole civilization. The way the River People lived was fundamentally different from anything he had ever known… because the most fundamental truth of the world — time — worked differently for them.

The first settlers of the Tomb of Ariel had all been Outsiders, so how great must their shock have been when their children were born so different from them? How much pain did that division bring, how much sorrow? How much effort did it take for them to create an entirely new kind of society?

With time, the number of Riverborn grew, while the number of Outsiders dwindled. However, the civilization that Ananke had described could not function without the Outsiders, who could travel the Great River and served as the connective tissue between various cities established on it.

What was it like for them, to see their children remain forever young? What was it like for the Riverborn, to watch their parents age when they never did? To see them leave when they couldn't?

…How did Riverborn children even become adults?

Suddenly, the story of the followers of Weaver being chased far upstream gained a much darker undertone.

Sunny shivered.

The civilization of the Great River turned out to be much stranger than he had thought. It was so strange, in fact, that he struggled to imagine it.

And that was not even mentioning the fact that Old Ananke had turned out to not be old at all… while also being ten times his age.

'Ah, I can't think anymore…'

It was too much to digest… especially this early in the morning.

Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and washed his face, then opened Ananke's wooden box. There was not much food left inside, which made him sigh.

Taking out a teapot and a plate brimming with juicy braised meat, rolled in seaweed leaves, he sat down and stared at the seven suns for a few moments.

'...Dusk of Fallen Grace is one of the original sybils. If Ananke, who was born long after they had entered the Tomb of Ariel, is two hundred years old, then what about Dusk?'

What about the Defilement? For how many centuries had the sybils fought against the spreading Corruption before losing all their cities except Fallen Grace?

In other words… for how long had the enemy been growing stronger, while their potential allies had been growing weaker?

Shaking his head, he poured the tea into two cups and grabbed a seaweed roll.

'No matter how long it has been, I need to grow stronger, too, and do it quickly.'

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A few more days passed. Nephis had spent them diligently learning how to control the ketch with the Names, while Sunny mostly sat at the bow, looking at the water silently.

Sometimes, he would allow himself to get distracted and either think about the Tomb of Ariel or study the Estuary Key. Almost all his time, however, was dedicated to mastering the fourth step of Shadow Dance.

Feeling that he was on the brink of an epiphany, Sunny even abandoned sleep. The seven suns rose and fell, but he remained motionless, his eyes veiled by deep shadows.

And then, finally, in the twilight of dusk…

Sunny suddenly straightened and opened his eyes wide.

'This is it…'

In his mind, countless memories, insights, and experiences clicked together with a deafening thunderclap.

The feeling of being embraced by the dark carapace of the Shadow Shell, the strange state of dissolving into shadows only to manifest himself into a tangible form… the memories of the Red Colosseum, where he slowly learned to fight in the unfamiliar body of the shadowspawn… the harrowing labyrinth of nightmares, the furious battle with the Azure Serpent…

All of it came together.

Being able to peer into the essence of the enemy, to mimic them both in thought and action. Training his body to be supremely adaptable and flexible. Breaking the rigid constraints of his mind to make it formless and shapeless, akin to a shadow. Those were all necessary steps, without which this evolution would not have been possible.

It was all for this moment.

It was all… to truly become a shadow.

'I see now.'

As Sunny gazed into the twilight, the encroaching darkness around him moved and stirred.

At the same time, a familiar voice whispered into his ear:

[Your Aspect Legacy mastery has increased.]

[You have received the right to claim a Legacy Relic.]

[...Your Shadow has evolved.]

Sunny let out a soft sigh.

Finally... after so long, he finally took another step.

Instead of summoning the runes immediately, he closed his eyes and assessed the breakthrough he had made.

The fourth step… it was a departure from his previous understanding of Shadow Dance, indeed. It was not about understanding the enemy to absorb their battle style and anticipate their moves. It was not even about peering into their essence to know their feelings and intentions.

It was about becoming the enemy, both in thought and in flesh.

Just like he had done with Daeron of the Twilight Sea.

As a result… the previous skills Sunny had cultivated through practicing Shadow Dance had all grown stronger. His ability to shadow his enemies had been elevated to a new level, and would allow him to do it much faster, as well as to a wider extent.

More importantly, his ability to learn the structure and function of the bodies of various creatures had been elevated tremendously. Up until now, Sunny had only ever achieved two forms except for his own — that of the shadowspawn, and that of the river serpent.

The former was the result of his many experiences in the Second Nightmare, while the latter was the result of an entire month of constant and meticulous observation.

He wouldn't need a month to learn a new form anymore. Of course, he wouldn't be able to do it instantaneously, either — but the amount of time was drastically reduced. Sunny felt that he would have been

able to become a river serpent in a week if he had mastered the fourth step before the dark island.

But that was because the Azure Serpent had been so much greater than him, and so very different from him. At the same time, the mad beast had been a human once, and thus not entirely alien. Some forms would take less time, while others would take longer.

…And the more forms he learned, the easier creating the next one would become.

'But it is also dangerous.'

The third step of Shadow Dance was dangerous, but the fourth step was much more so. If Sunny wasn't careful about changing his form too drastically and too often, he could very well lose the connection to his own.

'I'll be careful.'

He sighed, then opened his eyes and finally summoned the runes.

Sunny really wanted to check how Soul Serpent had evolved, but the runes of his absent Shadow were lifeless and dull. He couldn't summon more information about Serpent while it was away.

So, he turned to his Aspect Legacy instead and read, holding his breath:

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [4/7].

First Relic: Claimed.

Second Relic: Claimed.

Third Relic: Claimed.

Fourth Relic: [Claim].

Fifth Relic: Unearned…

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then whispered quietly:

"Claim."

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

Then, it seemed as though the world turned a little darker, and the Spell spoke:

[You have claimed an Aspect Legacy Relic.]

Its words echoed above the flowing water. There was silence for a moment, and then, the Spell whispered:

[...You have received a fragment of Shadow's Domain.]

Chapter-1302: Absolute Law

Sunny froze, paralyzed by the whisper of the Spell.

'...What?'

Had he heard right? Had it really said… a fragment of Shadow's Domain?

Of a god's Domain?

'No, wait…'

What even was a Divine Domain, and how could there be a fragment of it? How could there be a fragment of any Domain, for that matter? Weren't Domains more concepts than things?

What could a fragment of a concept look like?!

Sunny took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

'Slow down. Think… most importantly, don't fall off the ketch!'

He was so out of it that he had almost swayed and tumbled over the side of the boat. Sunny was more than fed up with suddenly falling into water, thanks to the Spell, so he hurriedly took a step back.

'A fragment of Shadow's Domain…'

Come to think about it… hadn't he heard something similar once? During the Second Nightmare, when they assaulted the Ivory City, the moon had been suddenly devoured by an enormous shadow, and the world was plunged into darkness.

When that happened, Noctis said… that he had not expected Sevras to possess a piece of Shadow's domain.

Ivory Dragon Sevirax was a direct descendant of Sun God and an immortal Saint, and yet it was strange for him to possess something like that. And now, Sunny received a piece of a god's Domain, too?

'D—damn…'

Sunny needed a few minutes to calm down. During these minutes, his imagination ran wild. He fantasized about all kinds of developments, from immediately becoming a Sovereign to instantly ascending to the Divine Rank.

However, his rationality eventually won.

'It doesn't work like that.'

Indeed, possessing a fragment of someone else's Domain did not mean having one of your own. More than that, the Ivory Lord, who had used his piece of Shadow's domain to seal the moon and rob Noctis of his power, had not shown any ability above what a Saint from a divine bloodline should have possessed.

So, while the fourth Aspect Relic of Shadow Dance had to be immensely valuable, it was definitely not a broken cheat item that would turn Sunny into a god among men.

'Yes, but… just what the hell is it, and what can it do?'

He threw a sideways glance at Nephis and Ananke, then turned back to the shimmering runes.

'And where the hell is it?'

Sunny read the runes from the very first one.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Tyrant.

Shadow Cores: [5/7].

Shadow Fragments: [1448/5000].

Memories: [Silver Bell]...

The Crown of Twilight was the last Memory on the list. The fragment of Shadow's domain was not among the Memories.

Neither was it among the Echoes, Shadows, Attributes, or Abilities. In fact, there was no indication of it anywhere…

'Wait, no. What is that?'

A single new rune appeared close to the end of the shimmering field of symbols. Sunny blinked as he stared in that direction.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control], [Shadow Step], [Shadow Manifestation].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Flaw: [Clear Conscience].

??

Dream Anchor: Tower of Longing.

'What are those question marks?'

He concentrated on the rune that had no meaning except for the lack of it, and there were suddenly a few more beside it.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

The new runes read:

[Fragment of the Shadow Realm].

??: ??

??: ??

??: ??

Description: [When Shadow made death, he has become death. Everything that Shadow swallowed died, and everything that died was swallowed by Shadow. Death was an absolute law, and thus, that which was everchanging was everchanging no more. Time was an absolute law, and thus, that which was everlasting was everlasting no more.

Space was an absolute law, and thus, that which was endless was endless no more. Wielding time, space, and death, the gods defeated and bound their enemies.

However, there were those who defied even absolute laws. One of these beings broke free of the Shadow Realm after being swallowed by it, and in doing so, splintered several small fragments of it. This is one of the fragments.]

??: [By calling upon the Fragment of Shadow Realm, its owner can summon a piece of Shadow's domain into existence.]

Sunny stared at the runes, perplexed.

'...Huh.'

Then, he stared at them some more.

'Huh?'

Finally, he dismissed them.

'Huh...'

An entire minute passed in complete silence.

'Well, I'll be damned.'

It seemed like… he had finally encountered something that existed outside the purview of the Nightmare Spell. Which was why the Spell was struggling to integrate the Shadow Realm Fragment into its generally all-encompassing system.

All the question marks and the awkward placement of the Fragment in the field of runes showed that much.

For some reason, that made Sunny feel dark glee. He was reveling in the image of the Spell being stumped and flustered…

On second thought, though, he quickly strangled that feeling. Sunny was more than certain that the Spell could read his mind. And while it was not exactly alive… most likely… he wouldn't go as far as to say that the Spell couldn't hold a grudge.

'No, no! It is completely understandable. I also can't make sense of that thing… yeah...'

The point was that the fourth relic granted to him by Shadow Dance could make a fragment of the Shadow Realm descend into the world. What that entailed, exactly… Sunny was not sure.

He had seen it happen once, in the Second Nightmare, and it caused the moon to be obscured by a giant shadow. Considering that he was a Master of Shadows and even one himself… something like that would definitely be very beneficial to him.

It was just that Sunny had no idea what the summoning would cost him, how it would transpire, or what the actual process was. He didn't even know if it could be done only once, or repeatedly… which was why he was hesitant to experiment and find out.

What would he do if the very first experiment turned out to also be the last time he could use the Shadow Realm Fragment?

As the seven suns drowned and the waters of the Great River started to shine, Sunny sighed and shook his head.

'Well, at least… if I am surprised by how that thing works, my enemies will definitely be surprised much more.'

Then, he shivered.

If a fragment of Shadow's Domain was the fourth relic of Shadow Dance… then what the hell would be the fifth?

…What about the seventh?

Chapter-1303: The Great and Terrible Lord Sunless

Eventually, they ran out of food. Ananke's wooden box was now completely empty — except for the plates and cups that Sunny had washed and carefully placed back. There was not even wine left, despite the fact that neither he nor Nephis were fond of alcohol, diluted or not.

The old woman seemed stricken by guilt at the lack of things to feed them…

Although she was not that old anymore.

Ananke looked to be in her sixties now. Her figure remained small and gaunt, but her back was as straight as an arrow. The cataracts disappeared from her eyes, revealing their original piercing blue color. The thin white hair of the elderly priestess turned grey and full, and although her tan skin was still mapped with wrinkles, it was not brittle and transparent anymore.

Her frailness and fragility were gone, replaced by wiry tenacity. Overall, she resembled quite a healthy old woman now.

…That old woman was currently pacing the wooden deck, crushed.

"Oh, no. Oh, what a blunder. I should have prepared more…"

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other in confusion. After a few moments of silence, Neph cleared her throat and said:

"Grandm… Ananke. You don't have to worry about us. Sunny and I… we are both used to hunger and hardship. This is nothing."

The old priestess looked at them silently.

"But you are Children of Weaver. How can I…"

Nephis shook her head.

"How do you think Children of Weaver live?"

Ananke fell silent, then said hesitantly:

"I don't know."

Sunny sighed and leaned on the side of the ketch with a smile.

"That one once spent two years traveling through desolate hells all alone. I recently led numerous refugees across three thousand kilometers of abomination-infested mountains in bitter winter. We are used to storming the strongholds of dreadful horrors, clashing with titans, and surviving all kinds of unspeakable things. Hell… that one time, Nephis destroyed an entire sun.

So believe her when she says that going a few days without food is nothing."

The old woman stared at them silently for a while, her eyes wide. Finally, she took a deep breath.

"Your glory rivals that of the Serpent King, my Lord and Lady… no wonder, no wonder…"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Serpent King?"

Ananke nodded with a distracted expression on her face.

"Yes… Daeron, the King of Twilight. We never met him or his people, but rumors of his deeds reached even Weave."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Oh? I met him, though."

The old woman froze.

"My Lord… you met the Serpent King?"

He nodded, slightly embarrassed.

"Yeah…"

Then, Sunny looked away and added:

"...I killed him."

Ananke's blue eyes widened, prompting him to hurriedly add:

"Ah, but he was already corrupted! It's not like I just killed him for no reason."

The old woman remained silent for a while, then quietly sighed.

"...Fish. I am going to catch some fish. We will be arriving at Weave soon, but still. My Lord and Lady shouldn't suffer hunger while in my care."

With that, she turned away from them with a determined expression… which failed to hide a look of pure amazement.

Sunny chuckled quietly and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the seven suns on his face. After a few moments, though, he opened them again and glanced at Ananke with curiosity.

He still wasn't sure how exactly one went about catching fish in the Great River.

As it turned out… Ananke had a very strange idea of what fish was.

First, she opened a hatch and produced several items from beneath the storage space beneath the deck — a large ceramic bottle, a bundled rope with a jagged hook attached to it, a set of heavy stone weights, and a scattering of softly shining soul shards, which were all stored in a transparent waterskin that seemed to be made from a swim bladder.

Then, she grabbed the bottle and climbed onto the helmsman bench, looking at the water from above. When Ananke opened the ceramic

vessel, the stench of blood spread through the air.

The bottle was, indeed, full of blood.

The old woman whispered several words, which Sunny couldn't really make out despite hearing them clearly. At the same time, the ketch suddenly started to slow down, and a subtle, imperceptible change spread through the world. He suddenly did not feel as safe as he had before.

'Our concealment is broken.'

As Sunny tensed, Ananke poured the blood into the water and outstretched one of her hands. A whirlwind of sparks appeared around it, and soon, a long harpoon manifested itself into existence.

Rising the harpoon above her head, the old woman inhaled deeply, and then spoke one more word aloud.

In the next moment, it was as though an invisible and intangible shockwave spread outward from the ketch. Sunny did not know what its purpose was, but he felt something stir deep within his soul.

The thick blood dissolved in the water, causing it to turn red. Then, as if responding to a call… a swift shadow shot toward the ketch from the deep.

'Crap!'

Sunny scrambled to his feet, but before he could do anything, Ananke's wiry arm whipped forward, and her harpoon tore through the air with a fierce whistle. It plunged into the water and disappeared from view.

…A minute later, the old woman dragged the corpse of a Fallen Nightmare Creature onto the deck. The abomination was not too large, with a grotesquely deformed body and flesh that resembled a sponge.

Sunny shivered in disgust.

"We are going to eat… that?"

The old woman shook her head.

"No, my Lord. This is simply the bait."

She summoned a curved knife and skillfully sliced the carcass of the creature open. Its blood refilled the ceramic bottle, while its soul shard joined the others in the transparent waterskin.

Finally, Ananke lodged the jagged hook in the abomination's flesh, attached the stone weights to it, and pushed the bladder of soul shards inside. Everything was done neatly, with practiced speed and precision, as if she had performed these actions a thousand times before.

Sunny and Nephis watched her silently.

Eventually, he rolled his shoulders and asked:

"Uh. If this is the bait… then what exactly are we catching?"

Chapter-1304: Fishing in the Great River

Hearing his question, the old woman smiled.

"This close to Weave? Huh… I hope it's a Bigmaw. Their meat is very tender."

Before they could ask what a Bigmaw was, she grunted and threw the dead abomination, as well as the stone weights, over the side of the ketch. As the bundle of rope swiftly unfolded, Ananke swiftly tied its end to a wooden post at the stern of the ketch with a sophisticated knot.

Soon, the bleeding carcass of the Nightmare Creature was being dragged a fair distance behind the boat, slowly sinking into the Great River. The old woman took up her harpoon again, this time gripping it with some tension. Her weathered face, however, was calm.

After waiting for a few minutes, she sighed.

"Usually, it would be an entire fishing party challenging the depths. But… I am the only one left, so…"

Ananke remained silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"Do not worry, my Lord and Lady. My harpoon has yet to miss. The fishes I catch never managed to swallow me up, either, and they won't today."

Sunny and Nephis silently looked at each other, then summoned their weapons.

However, there was no need.

When something massive finally rose from the depths, attracted by the scent of blood and the fragrance of soul essence, Ananke swiftly readied her harpoon, gazed at the water, and sent it flying with one decisive motion.

...Soon, they were roasting the meat of a Corrupted Monster over a bronze brazier. The "fish" the old woman had caught turned out to be a giant shark-like creature whose body was covered in tough bone armor. However, the harpoon had slid past the bone plates in the only spot where it was possible — above the creature's hidden gills.

Sunny did not know what enchantments Ananke's weapon possessed, but after striking the abomination in its weak spot, the harpoon killed the Bigmaw in one blow. The monster was then dressed down, its succulent meat filling the wooden box, as well as the much larger storage space of the Covetous Coffer.

As she seasoned the roasting meat with salt, the old woman sighed.

"In the past, we would have harvested much more. Skin, scales, bones, swim bladder, fangs… nothing would have gone to waste. There are very few building materials to be found in the vast waters of the Great River, so maintaining a city is not an easy task. We River People have learned to use every resource available."

She placed a long strip of meat on the grill and shook her head.

"There's no need to be so frugal now, though. I am already thankful to the River for this sustenance. With it, I can feed Lord and Lady… that is enough."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"But isn't it very dangerous, to hunt the Corrupted this way? You never know what will come from the depths, after all. This time, it was a Corrupted Monster. Next time, it could be a Great one, or something even more dreadful."

Ananke nodded, still concentrating on preparing a meal for them.

"Of course… it is very dangerous. Many fishermen die. Remember, though, that we were much stronger before. There were elders

leading us, as well. The truly harrowing creatures very rarely come down the river, too… when they did, we usually learned in advance, and the whole city assembled to battle them. That is how Weave survived."

…Until it didn't.

Sunny sighed, thinking about the dying civilization of the Great River. There was presumably only one human city left in the Tomb of Ariel — Fallen Grace. How were they supposed to turn the tide of history and save it?

His somber thoughts were interrupted by Ananke, who placed a juicy piece of meat on a plate and offered it to him with a smile.

Her teeth had turned sturdy and white at some point.

"My Lord! Please, enjoy."

She seemed to be in a good mood.

Looking at the smiling old woman, Sunny couldn't remain sullen, either.

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Two days later, something finally appeared on the horizon. It was a shining dot at the start, but as the ketch drew closer, the shape of a distant lighthouse could be seen, with sunlight reflecting from its polished bronze spire.

This was the first human-made structure that Sunny and Nephis had seen in the Nightmare. Looking at it filled their hearts with emotions… Nephis, especially, looked at the lighthouse with a distant expression. Its radiance reflected in her eyes, illuminating their ineffable depths.

Sunny shifted and turned to Ananke, who was still holding the steering oar.

"Have we reached Weave?"

She lingered for a few moments.

"A boundary of it, yes."

The old woman fell silent after that, and Sunny returned to Nephis. Noticing her distant, almost forlorn expression, he asked:

"Are you thinking about your First Nightmare?"

She nodded slowly.

With a sigh, Sunny placed a hand on Neph's shoulder and pulled her closer, allowing her to lean on him slightly. He didn't say anything, and neither did she. Together, they watched the lighthouse draw nearer.

Soon, the ketch moved close enough for them to see the details.

The lighthouse stood on a small island. That island, however, was not a natural one — instead, it seemed to have been crafted from the carapace of a sea monster and floated on water, supporting a large and solemn hall built of dark stone. The lighthouse rose from the hall, serving as its tower.

There was a long wooden pier protruding into the flowing waters of the Great River, as well. The strangest part, however, was that the island did not seem to be drifting with the current. Instead, it remained firmly in place.

Another startling detail was that the dark lighthouse with its shining spire… was not a lighthouse at all. Instead, it was a windmill.

Its long blades rotated slowly, pushed by the wind, white fabric rippling slightly as it circled between land and sky.

The island looked quite surreal, especially after weeks spent seeing nothing but flowing water. But it must have been really beautiful at night, illuminated from below by the opalescent radiance of the river.

Ananke finally spoke, her voice a little low:

"This... is the House of Parting."

Chapter-1305: House of Parting

"This... is the House of Parting. It is the furthest point of Weave as one travels upstream."

Ananke's voice sounded uncharacteristically dispirited.

'House of Parting...'

Sunny studied the artificial island and the solemn structure built upon it, then turned to the old woman and asked:

"It's… a windmill?"

She nodded.

"Yes, my Lord. The tower harvests the wind to maintain the island."

Ananke lingered for a second, and then added:

"The cities of the Great River are actually more akin to flotillas, each consisting of many city-ships — some small like this one, some spanning dozens of kilometers across. They migrate sometimes, but mostly they have to stay in place. There is nothing to anchor a ship to on the Great River, though."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Is the Great River so deep that no anchor can reach its bottom?"

Ananke shook her head.

"It is not that the floor of the Great River is too deep, it's that it doesn't exist. No one has ever managed to reach it, at least... so, we had to find other ways."

She pointed to the rotating blades of the towering windmill.

"There are various ways to make a city-ship resist the current, from mundane ones to magical. The House of Parting… you can't see it from here, but there is a great water wheel at the back of the island, constantly propelling it forward at the same speed as the River pushes it back. Its mechanism is mostly powered by the current itself, but the windmill lightens the burden significantly."

She sighed.

"The island's mechanism is on the brink of collapse, now… I've tried to repair it as well as I could, but my knowledge is insufficient to keep an entire city from breaking apart. There's little point to, anyway."

Sunny and Nephis looked at the dark windmill, feeling a sense of awe. The island in front of them was actually the creation of incredible human ingenuity — a floating city district that used the wind and the power of the Great River itself to fight against the currents of time.

Even now that the people of Weave were gone, it was still pushing forward, refusing to become a thing of the past.

The ketch approached the island in solemn silence. As it drew close, Ananke released the wind filling the sails, skillfully guided the boat to the pier, and moored it to the pier with a piece of rope.

The three of them left the small ketch for the first time in a long, long while.

Feeling the sturdy wooden planks of the pier under his feet, Sunny enjoyed the fact that the ground was not swaying and took a few steps. He was swaying like a drunk himself for the first couple, but then regained his balance.

As he stretched his limbs, Nephis looked around and asked:

"The House of Parting… why was this place given such a name?"

Ananke smiled faintly as she headed toward the stone hall, and gestured for them to follow.

"It is the point of Weave that is the furthest upstream. You know that the bodies of Riverborn like me don't age… however, humans are not created to be immortal. If one lives for too long and her soul grows weary, she might want to rest in the embrace of Shadow."

The old woman turned around and looked at her ketch, tied to the peer of the House of Parting.

"When that happens, the one leaving comes to the House of Parting. Those who love them come too, to say farewell. They prepare a feast and celebrate. When all is said and done, the weary Riverborn sets sail to go on their last journey. They sail far, far upstream… until they reach the end of their lifespan and pass away. One way or another."

Ananke lingered for a while, and then added wistfully:

"Actually, I considered going on such a journey too, before receiving a dream of your arrival. Ah… ironically, I ended up repeating all the same steps, stopping just shy of the last one. It feels strange, to return to the House of Parting from upstream alive."

She chuckled and shook her head:

"In truth, there are two of these Houses. The other one is situated at the furthest point of Weave downstream… all other human cities on the Great River are the same, I'd imagine. The Lower House is meant for those who were not given a choice, and died an untimely death. Their bodies, if recovered, are sent downstream, to return to the Estuary — the origin of everything.

Of course, every Outsider departs on their last journey from the Lower House, as well."

Sunny tilted his head, thinking. If the bodies of all perished Outsiders were sent downstream, and the Estuary was the source of the Defilement… was that how Dusk of Fallen Grace had ended up becoming a Nightmare Creature?

Or had she succumbed to Corruption first, and was given the river burial as a result? She had been wearing a burial shroud when they

first met, after all.

'Is she a friend or an enemy?'

Ananke sighed.

"My Lord and Lady… we will spend the night here. I will retrieve some of the supplies I stored on this island, and in the morning, we will continue on the way to Weave proper. There will be more supplies for you to take downstream there, so I hope you don't mind."

Sunny felt that spending the night in a place called the House of Parting was a bit ominous, but he was not going to refuse a night of sleeping on solid ground, with a roof over his head, out of superstition.

More than that, while he and Nephis had enjoyed plenty of rest on the way, Ananke had mostly stayed awake, controlling the ketch and preventing anything dangerous from happening to them. She had to take a break, too.

He nodded.

"Of course. Guide the way."

The old woman nodded, and continued walking toward the great hall.

Her steps were light and energetic.

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By the time the seven suns fell into the river, the three of them were inside the House of Parting. The interior of the grand hall was beautiful and solemn, but at the same time strangely modest — the followers of Weaver had not been a prosperous nation, after all.

Looking at the decor of the stone hall, Sunny could clearly see which ornaments and decorations had been inherited from the original Outsiders, who came from the Dream Realm, and which were crafted by their Riverborn descendants.

Despite being attentive and earnest artisans, the Riverborn were clearly much less sophisticated than their ancestors, not to mention extremely limited in terms of resources.

In fact, he was surprised by some of the things he had seen already… the wood that Ananke's ketch and the pier of the House of Parting were built of, for example. Where had it come from? The fruits that she had treated them to, as well. There was no soil anywhere on the Great River, so how could there be trees? How could there be flour to bake pies, and tea leaves to brew tea?

Curious, he asked the old woman about it. She smiled:

"The trees? There are some. There are floating gardens and fields in Weave. They are not too large, of course, because the surface of the city is limited. So… we can only afford to eat fruit, bread, and rice on special occasions. Most of the year, the River People eat what the River gives."

Sunny looked down, suddenly feeling guilty. So the delicious food he and Nephis had been enjoying was something that Ananke herself had not tasted often.

They were currently in one of the smaller chambers of the House of Parting, the old woman preparing to cook them a late supper. He had been rather complacent in allowing her to take care of them… mostly because it felt great to be pampered by someone caring and kind, but also because Ananke was strangely adamant about treating Sunny and Nephis with utmost dedication.

However, he suddenly wanted something else to happen today.

Walking over to the old woman, he gently pushed her away from the table where all the ingredients were waiting to be prepared and cooked.

"Go rest, Ananke. I'll take care of everything."

She looked at him with big eyes.

"But, my Lord…"

Sunny resolutely shook his head.

"No "buts"! You don't need to cook. Today, this lord is going to cook for you instead."

Throwing an evaluating look at the ingredients, he grinned and added:

"Do you know? I am planning to get rich by opening a restaurant in the future."

Then, he paused for a moment, scratched his head, and pointed at Nephis... who gave him a confused look in response.

Sunny smiled brightly.

"And that… is my star chef. Come and help your boss, chef! You don't want to get fired before the restaurant even opens, do you?"

Chapter-1306: Paths of Ascension

Sunny could not really treat Ananke to the staples of the waking world cuisine, since he lacked the ingredients. He couldn't even cook up the few classic military dishes, which were mostly based on using synthetic rations in inventive ways.

However, he and Nephis still managed to make a delicious meal — they were Awakened, after all, and Awakened were supreme masters of turning monster meat into all kinds of delightful dishes.

In fact, Awakened cuisine was as varied as its basic ingredients were limited. There were some fundamental skills taught to everyone, but each Citadel and region of the Dream Realm added its own flavor to the tradition. So, each Awakened cook was, in a sense, unique.

Take Sunny, for example… his fundamental skills had been taught to him by Teacher Julius. Since Teacher Julius was anchored in Bastion, Sunny's cooking acquired a hint of Bastion's tradition. Later, it was influenced by the flavor passed down to Nephis by the Immortal Flame clan, and then assimilated the improvised habits of the Sleepers of the Dark City.

After that, he absorbed the local tradition of the Chained Isles, as well as learning this and that from the government Awakened in Antarctica. Since there was no other Awakened whose culinary skills were the result of this exact combination of influences, the flavor of Sunny's cooking was unique.

...Soon, the chamber was filled with a delicious smell. The meal they prepared was not the most visually stunning, but its fragrance was tantalizing. The meat had just the right amount of crust on the outside, while the insides were juicy and moist. It had absorbed the spices and the heat of the coals, becoming tender enough to melt on

the tongue.

Still, it didn't look too pretty... Awakened did not really care about the presentation, since their meals were usually eaten in a hurry while keeping one eye out for the prowling abominations.

There were some side dishes, at least.

Ananke tasted the dish presented to her with diligently hidden caution, but then, her eyes widened slightly. Throwing a quick glance at Sunny and Nephis, she hesitated for a few moments, and then attacked her food like a hungry wolf.

Sunny smiled.

'That's better…'

It was a far cry from the start of their journey together, when he had to force her to eat even a single small pie. The old woman's appetite was not making him worry anymore.

'That said… why was she so surprised? Huh? Do I not look like a guy who can outcook every damned cook out there?'

Sunny grimaced.

Well… maybe it was because he was going around boasting about how he had eaten nothing but rotten mimic meat for a month. It was only fair for people to doubt his taste after hearing such things. Still…

'I better get Aiko to do the promotions when I open my restaurant. And, uh… maybe write me a guide on what I should and shouldn't say…'

He could have the shop and the restaurant in the same building. Customers would come to browse the Memories, then have a meal to celebrate the purchase. And he would receive the money for both!

Chuckling, Sunny focused on his own portion.

Soon, they were done with the supper and were preparing to rest.

The House of Parting consisted of the main ceremonial hall, several smaller halls, and a scattering of rooms for the departing and their close ones to sleep in before saying the final goodbyes.

So, Sunny and Nephis were going to enjoy sleeping on actual beds tonight, for the first time since leaving the siege capital to participate in the Battle of the Black Skull.

Before that, however, all three of them remained around the table, drinking tea and savoring its refreshing warmth.

Despite the solemn nature of their surroundings, the atmosphere was light and uplifting. It was hard not to enjoy the simple comforts after spending months in the wilderness.

Maybe it was this relaxed mood that prompted Sunny to ask the question he had been hesitating to ask for a while. Putting down his cup, he glanced at the old woman and asked:

"Ananke… can I ask what Rank you are?"

She looked at him curiously.

"My Rank? Why, of course… I have reached Transcendence not too long ago, my Lord."

Sunny nodded slowly. He had initially suspected that Ananke was a being of much greater power, but after getting to know her and learning about the fate of Weave, his impression changed.

It felt a bit strange, to meet an Awakened who was two hundred years old, but only as powerful as someone like Saint Tyris... the immortal Chain Lords notwithstanding. The Spell had descended into the waking world only half a century ago, after all, but there were already Saints and Sovereigns.

However, it made sense… the original inhabitants of the Great Realm had not been cursed with as cruel a teacher as the Nightmare Spell. They had not benefited from its merciless guidance and the lethal necessity to either ascend or die.

Even Ananke, who was a priestess of the Spell and bestowed with

some of its powers, did not know anything about Nightmares.

Without the Nightmares… how had the ancient humans even Awakened?

That was something Sunny had been curious about for a long time. In fact, he knew very little about how the ancient Awakened did anything without the Spell.

He leaned forward a little and asked, his voice full of curiosity:

"How does one become Transcendent?"

Ananke looked at him in surprise.

"You don't know, my Lord?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I do know, of course, how one might Transcend — in the future, where the Nightmare Spell controls all these matters. But I don't know how people rose to greater power before."

Nephis pricked her ears, as well.

The old woman smiled, lingered for a while, and then said thoughtfully:

"...Although my knowledge is limited, I will try to explain as best I can. Let's see… the first step is, of course, to Awaken. To Awaken, one must gain control over their soul essence, and use that control to form the soul core."

Sunny blinked.

"...In that order?"

Ananke did not seem to understand the question.

"Naturally. How would one form the core without being able to control essence? It is like trying to build a building without bricks. There are some powerful creatures who are born with their soul cores

already formed, sure, and have to learn to move their essence as they mature. But most are born Dormant, like us humans."

She paused for a moment.

"Learning how to control essence is the hardest part. Forming the core takes time and effort, but as long as you have the knowledge, success is all but guaranteed. Well… some still fail, of course, and die after their souls collapse."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other.

So… the ancient humans Awakened in the reverse order compared to modern humans, who formed their soul core after the First Nightmare and gained the ability to control essence after surviving the first journey to the Dream Realm. That was how the Spell arranged things.

'Interesting.'

Nephis took a sip of her tea and asked, her voice tinged with a hint of curiosity:

"Then how does one learn to control their essence?"

The Awakened of the waking world received the ability to sense their essence from the Spell. The intuitive knowledge of how to control it was gifted to them, too… it just took time and practice to turn that control into a practical skill.

Most received these gifts after Awakening, while Nephis had to catch up after becoming a Master.

Ananke thought for a few moments.

"There is… no single way to gain control over your soul essence. In fact, it is a unique experience for many. Some spend long years meditating and perfecting their souls, eventually entering a state of unity between mind and soul. Some attune themselves to the world and gather insights about the nature of living things, traveling from realm to realm.

Some follow the teachings of great warriors and train their bodies, testing themselves through hardship and battle. Some even receive sudden epiphanies in a moment of dire crisis with no preparation whatsoever."

She hesitated for a bit.

"However, there is a path that anyone can walk — both the simplest and the most dangerous, as well as the most vile."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"And what is that path?"

Ananke sighed.

"...It is to absorb soul essence that has already Awakened. Through killing those who have already Awakened, and plundering their soul shards."

Her face turned grim.

"The Awakened essence already knows how to be controlled, so when it is mixed with the essence of Dormant beings, it will change that essence… a little. Absorb enough of it, and your essence will Awaken, too. Things were simple during the Age of Heroes, when many Corrupted prowled the realms, and humans had to battle them to survive.

But as the eras changed and there were fewer monsters to kill… some humans and noble creatures turned to killing each other, instead."

Chapter-1307: Before the Nightmare Spell

The old woman fell silent. Sunny and Nephis were somber, too. It was too easy to imagine what vile acts those who lusted for power could commit in a world that rewarded murder with strength.

In fact, the same vileness could have consumed the waking world, where absorbing the essence of slain humans was easier than hunting down countless Nightmare Creatures. If not for the government and people like Jet, who maintained order and suppressed the darker side of the Awakened society with an iron fist, things would have turned grim long ago.

Legacy clans also played their part, preventing human enclaves in the Dream Realm from spiraling into lawlessness.

Eventually, Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"So… once your soul essence Awakens and you can control it, the next step is to patiently work on forming the soul core. What happens then?"

Ananke smiled and pointed to her chest, where the soul core of a human was usually located.

"Accumulation of power. Ascension is a step of rising above one's mortal nature by improving the quality of their essence, and their body as well. This step can be slow if one refines themselves naturally, or fast, if one improves their essence by absorbing the essence of stronger beings. Once the soul essence reaches a qualitative change, the soul core will reform itself and grow stronger, as well.

Of course, it won't happen without some conscious refinement,

either."

Sunny tilted his head.

"Uh… how does one refine their essence, exactly?"

Ananke laughed.

"It's not something I can explain in one conversation! There are methods and techniques, the knowledge of which has been accumulated over countless generations and is taught to disciples over many years. Even then, very few manage to succeed. Ah… of course, all those who do succeed have to find the way into their Soul Sea first.

Without the ability to enter the Soul Sea, it would take one many lifetimes to Ascend even with the best refinement technique."

She shook her head with a smile.

"At least that is how it is for us humans. Some of the noble creatures have their own ways… they can possess multiple soul cores, as well, and walk the path of Ascension more naturally."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Wait… people have to learn how to enter their Soul Seas?"

The old woman nodded matter-of-factly.

"Of course. That is… without the guidance of the Nightmare Spell. Weaver gave us mortals a gift that can hasten each step on the path of Ascension, including the discovery of one's Soul Sea."

'That's… unexpected.'

Everyone just assumed that being able to access the Soul Sea was a natural ability of all Awakened — including Sleepers. As it turned out, that was another thing that the Spell had simplified for the humans of the waking world.

'Ruthless, relentless, and… immensely effective. That is how the Spell

is.'

The more Sunny learned about the Nightmare Spell, the more he realized how ingenious and cruelly effective it was in helping… no, forcing people to become stronger, stronger, and stronger still — until they either rose as high as they could and higher than that, or died.

For what purpose, he did not know.

Nephis sighed.

"What about Transcendence?"

Ananke nodded.

"Transcendence is different. It is not just about accumulation… it is a step of profound transformation, where a mortal assumes the first qualities of the divine. The soul essence has to become much more potent, the soul core has to become much more voluminous. Most importantly, an Awakened has to become one with the world and be recognized by it.

Their soul has to be… expanded beyond the confines of the body and fused, to a small extent, with the the world. It is… hard to explain with words, forgive me."

Sunny tilted his head, thinking. Ananke's words did indeed sound very vague and esoteric, but he felt that he understood what she was talking about.

It was like when Saint Tyris appeared and the sunlight seemed to shift a little, as if wishing to be close to her. The world itself responded to the Transcendent, and even bent to their will sometimes.

Then again, it also responded to a few people below the Transcendent Rank... like Nephis, or Jet, or Sunny himself.

That was... peculiar.

Ananke took a sip of tea and added, her voice bright:

"Of course, the connection between a Transcendent and the world is not all-encompassing. Rather, it is a connection to one or, very rarely, several aspects of the world… be it water, wind, shadow, light, or something else entirely. And, therefore, the most important step an Ascended human has to take to achieve Transcendence is to awaken their Aspect."

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other in confusion.

"Awaken their Aspect? What do you mean?"

The old woman coughed.

"Uh… but that is exactly what I mean? That one must possess an Aspect to Transcend?"

Sunny massaged his temples.

"Wait… don't all Awakened possess an Aspect?"

Ananke chuckled.

"Of course not! Every Awakened human possesses the potential to realize an Aspect, but there are plenty of those who never do. Maybe even most. However, the higher you rise on the path of Ascension, the harder it becomes to move further without claiming your Aspect, as well as your Flaw. It is impossible to Transcend without them."

That information was truly shocking. Neither Sunny nor Nephis could digest it quickly. Awakened without Aspects? There was such a thing?

Sunny tried to remember every human he had fought in the First and Second Nightmares. Had all of them shown Aspect Abilities? He really couldn't remember… or rather, he could not tell based on his memories.

Nephis, meanwhile, frowned and asked, her voice full of contemplation:

"Why is it that only humans possess Aspects? Why don't creatures… noble creatures… have them as well?"

To the humans of the waking world, everything that was not a human was a Nightmare Creature. But, of course, Sunny had learned a long time ago that this wasn't the case. There were humans, and there were creatures — like the original Saint or Nightmare.

It was only after they succumbed to Corruption did the "noble creatures", as Ananke called such beings, become abominations. The problem was that there were only humans in the waking world, while every creature in the Dream Realm was already corrupted. That was why the concept of something that was not human, but also not abominable, was hard to accept.

However… in the ancient times, humans and noble creatures lived side by side. Nevertheless, the difference between them was the same — humans could only rise in Rank, but possessed Aspects, while noble creatures rose both in Rank and Class, but had no Aspects of their own.

So, the question Nephis asked was indeed interesting.

Ananke smiled.

"Why, it is because noble creatures were created by the gods, while we humans weren't."

Sunny blinked.

'Huh?'

He did know that creating living things was an authority exclusive to the gods — which was why Nether's feat of making Saint and her people was so remarkable.

Now, he learned that all creatures were the result of the gods exercising that authority.

But what did Ananke mean when she said that humans weren't made the same way?

Noticing their confusion, she chuckled.

"Humans weren't created by anyone, and instead just appeared from

the same stuff the gods were born from. It's just that… if the gods were the flame, then we humans were tiny sparks that shot out as the bonfire was dying out. Nevertheless, we come from the same source. Which is why all humans possess the potential to become divine, as well as the ability to awaken an Aspect.

Why the path of Ascension is open to us."

Sunny frowned.

'There was an ever-changing void, where Desire was born. From it came Direction, and the gods…'

He still did not really understand the meaning of these mysterious words, but if Ananke was telling the truth — and not just retelling baseless myths — humans came from the "Desire" and "Direction" as well, just as the gods had.

He shook his head.

"Alright… I can understand that. But why did you say that it's not only an Aspect that is required to Transcend, but also the Flaw?"

The old woman sighed.

"Because one can't exist without the other. Imperfection is also an absolute law, just like death… and so, nothing is flawless. Even the world itself is flawed. Even the gods, who were born flawless, are not perfect anymore. And so, we humans are flawed, too."

She smiled and added, her voice calm:

"But that is a good thing. Flawless things are perfect, and so, they can never improve. They can never grow. They can only remain still and unchanging, which is no different from being dead. Being flawed is the essence of life, my Lord and Lady. It is also the essence of growth.

After all, what is life if not a constant struggle to grow and improve?"

Chapter-1308: Weave

Sunny almost choked on his tea.

He had grown accustomed to Ananke being helpful and accommodating, so he did not expect her to become philosophical all of a sudden. Worse still, because of his own Flaw, he had no chance but to answer her philosophical question.

'What is life, huh?'

He coughed.

"Well, I don't know. To me, life is all about being rich and comfortable. Throw a little decadence in the mix, and it's even better! If I ever manage to build such a delightful life for myself, I'll be more than happy to never improve or grow… apart from growing fatter, that is…"

The old woman laughed.

"That is a remarkable dream, my Lord."

Nephis threw a burning gaze at him at the mention of decadence, then turned to Ananke.

"Then what about the next step? How does one become Supreme?"

Her voice was tense.

The old woman lingered for a while, then shook her head with a sigh.

"That I don't know… and there is no one left to teach me. I am sorry that I can't be of help."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, no… you've already been very helpful. We learned a lot from you."

Ananke smiled.

"In that case, thank you for this meal, my Lord and Lady. I've been blessed by your grace. Rest well tonight."

She rose and added, her voice tinged with melancholy:

"...Tomorrow, we sail to the center of the city."

After she left, Sunny and Nephis remained silent for a while. Both were thoughtful, pondering the startling truths of how the ancient humans walked the path of Ascension before the Nightmare Spell.

Eventually, Sunny sighed.

"It seems that Awakening took a lot longer before, but was not nearly as fatal as it is with the Nightmare Spell."

Nephis nodded silently. He scratched the back of his head and added:

"I'm more curious about something else, though. If it is possible to Awaken without the help of the Spell, then why has no one accomplished just that in the waking world? Why were there no Awakened in our history?"

She frowned.

"Maybe it is because the waking world has nothing to do with the Dream Realm, and functions… functioned according to a different set of laws. Or maybe there were Awakened in our history, but their stories have become mere myths."

Nephis shook her head and added, her voice uncertain:

"It would also not be surprising if the possibility was there, but no one has ever managed to grasp it. After all, all steps except the first one — gaining the ability to sense your essence — require some kind of knowledge. Forming the core, refining essence, expanding the soul… you wouldn't be able to do it blindly.

For the ancient humans of the Dream Realm, it was not too hard to gain that knowledge. All they had to do was observe the Awakened creatures or learn directly from one of the deities."

Sunny nodded.

"But those deities are all long dead. There were only humans in the waking world, and so, they had no one to learn from and no one to show them that there was something to be learned. Yes… it is a good theory. The theory that our world is simply different from the Dream Realm is also good. As well as that there were actually a few Awakened in history. They're all good theories.

Which one do you think is the correct one?"

Nephis lingered before answering. After a while, she sighed.

"There's no way to tell. We still know too little about the Dream Realm. We also don't know how the Nightmare Spell infected our world, and why. But, personally… I don't buy that there has always been a connection between the two. If so, then why is the waking world so isolated, so unique… so singular?"

She shook her head.

"Why are there no similarities in the languages, the myths, the traditions? Why has there never been an Awakened creature on Earth before the Nightmare Spell? No soul shards, no sorcery, no Aspects, and no Flaws? Why was there no Corruption?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking. Then, he said tentatively:

"Maybe it was created as a sanctuary… or an ark. If so, then perhaps it is precisely because there were no Awakened, no soul shards, no sorcery, and no Aspects… that there was no Corruption."

He shrugged with a sigh.

"As for the languages and myths, I don't know. To be honest, I don't really believe in that sanctuary stuff. I just said what came to mind. You are right… our world is the only place that was drastically

different from the Dream Realm, before the Nightmare Spell infected it. We don't know anything about anything, so how would we know the reason why?"

Sunny shook his head and rose to wash the dishes.

"In any case, I am tired, and it is time to rest. Where are you going to sleep?"

Nephis gave him a long look.

"...Is there a particular reason you're asking?"

Hearing that, he almost dropped the dirty plates.

"What… I just want to know which room you chose, to pick a different one!"

He huffed, glanced at her, and grinned.

"Although…"

But Nephis was already standing up.

"Goodnight!"

A few moments later, she was gone.

Sunny remained standing for a while, alone in the empty chamber.

Eventually, he sighed.

"...How come I'm the only one doing dishes?"

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"Look!"

The ketch was flying across the water, its sails full of wind. Sunny was standing at the bow, staring into the distance curiously. Nephis was a few steps back, sitting on the deck with her eyes closed.

Hearing his voice, she opened them and looked ahead.

There, a floating city was slowly appearing from beyond the horizon.

Weave.

It was much larger than Sunny had imagined, with countless artificial islands connected together to form a single whole. There was a network of canals between the various districts that served as roads, and a forest of narrow towers rising into the sky. Most of them were windcatchers, just like the tower of the House of Parting was — some blades still rotated, some were broken and still.

Torn scarlet fabric fluttered in the wind.

The architecture of Weave was varied, airy, and beautiful. Some buildings were constructed out of stone, some seemed to be carved of ivory, some were pavilions of sun-bleached, bright silk. There were districts with homes and houses, groves of fruit trees, and even entire city-ships taken entirely by a single elegant palace or a solemn temple.

Some distance away from the residential districts, separated from them by a wide stretch of water, were vast floating fields and gardens.

Bathed in the light of the seven suns, the floating city was strange and fantastical.

However, neither Sunny nor Nephis were enchanted by its dreamlike beauty. Because, above all else, Weave seemed… eerie and forlorn.

The tall windcatchers were still or broken. The streets and canals were empty, with no soul in sight. The groves were overgrown and wild, while the fields were desolate and empty. Some city-ships were drifting apart, their mechanisms broken, while others were tilted and partially submerged in water.

It was a ghost town.

Strangely, though, while some buildings bore scars or had collapsed, most were intact. This was not the picture of destruction and devastation that they had imagined.

"Welcome to Weave, my Lord and Lady."

Ananke's voice sounded slightly mournful.

…It also sounded very different from before. There had been a time when her voice was weak and creaky, like dry wood. Now, it was bright and melodious like a clear stream.

'Right.'

Sunny still felt rather strange when talking to the current Ananke.

The old priestess… no, he couldn't even call her that anymore, because Ananke wasn't old anymore.

Turning around, he looked at the young woman steering the ketch. She seemed only a few years older than Sunny and Nephis, if any…

More than that, she was exquisitely beautiful. With her small stature and glistening ebony hair, dusky skin and piercing blue eyes, Ananke looked like an enchanting river spirit. Her lovely face was lively and captivating, and her disarming smile was bright enough to illuminate the world.

'...Weird! It's weird!'

Sunny was deeply uncomfortable for the last couple of days because of how young Ananke had become. On top of that… despite being ten times his age, she seemed too earnest and even slightly naive.

That was the person he had been calling Grandmother!

With a sigh, Sunny tried to shake off the feeling of incongruity and asked in a strange tone:

"Haven't you told us that Weave was destroyed, Ananke? It… doesn't seem damaged that terribly."

The young priestess remained silent for a while, then answered with a sad smile:

"There is more than one way to destroy a city, my Lord."

With that, she moved the steering oar and sent the ketch flying toward the central district of the eerie city of Weave, where only the wind disrupted the ghostly silence and emptiness permeated desolate streets.

Chapter-1309: Mad Prince

Soon, they slowed down and entered one of the canals. Ananke whispered a few words, and the sails lowered themselves. Summoning her long harpoon, she stood up and used it as a pole to push the ketch forward.

As it traveled deeper into the heart of the city, Sunny and Nephis silently watched the districts that floated past. Indeed, there were no living beings here — at least none that they could see.

Nephis shifted slightly.

"You said that Weave was devastated by a Defiled. Is that creature still here?"

Ananke slowly shook her head.

"No. But… I've been absent for a long time. An abomination or two could have crawled out of the River to make a nest among the ruins. It is better to be careful."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other and silently summoned their weapons.

'Just what the hell… has happened here?'

Eventually, the ketch reached an intersection of two wide canals. Ananke allowed it to drift for a dozen meters, then stopped at a small platform. There were stone steps leading from the platform to one of the central districts of the city, and after roping the ketch to a post, she lightly jumped down.

Together, the three of them ascended the stairs and entered a wide plaza. It was desolate and partially submerged in water, with scars on the collapsed buildings hinting at a fearsome battle that must have

taken place here a long time ago.

Ananke, who had been strangely reluctant to answer their questions before, finally sighed and turned to face them.

"The Defiled that destroyed Weave… visited us almost half a century ago. However, the city did not die until a few decades after that."

Both Sunny and Nephis looked at her in confusion. How could a city be destroyed decades after it was attacked?

The young priestess remained silent for a while, then gestured to the drowned plaza.

"This is where the battle ended, and the slaughter started. I've told you before that Outsiders are vital to the existence of the River People. They are the oldest and most powerful among us. They are also the only ones who can travel unimpeded across the River.

Without them, the cities would become completely isolated from each other… well, that doesn't really apply to this city of exiles, since we were always on our own."

She looked down.

"But since Weave is located close to the desolate future, we had to constantly defend ourselves from powerful Corrupted. The elders were the only ones who could pursue and eradicate them — otherwise, those horrid creatures could come and go as they pleased, retreating when wounded to attack again… and again, and again. So, that was how the Defiled destroyed our city."

Ananke gazed at the drowned plaza with a grim expression.

"He simply killed every Outsider in Weave. After the elders were gone, the rest of us were slowly driven to extinction. Some died fighting the Corrupted, some succumbed to sorrow and despair. The less of us there were, the harder it was to keep those who remained alive. Blow after blow… disaster after disaster… eventually, despite all my efforts, Weave was no more."

The young priestess took a deep breath and turned to them with a

sad smile.

"The ships and the buildings remain, but without the people, they are just an empty shell."

She took a deep breath.

"My Lord, my Lady. I told you that we must come here to gather supplies, but that was not entirely true. To be honest… I just wanted you to see Weave, at least once. So that someone would remember it — remember us — even when the ships and the buildings are gone, too."

Sunny felt his chest becoming heavy, but Nephis seemed to be affected more. Her face was motionless as usual, but there was a hint of darkness in her eyes. Taking a step forward, she placed her hand on Ananke's shoulder and gently squeezed it.

She must have seen herself in the young priestess.

The Priestess of the Nightmare Spell… in a city built by the followers of Weaver, that title must have carried incredible weight. It was very likely that Ananke had suddenly become the ruler of the decimated Weave after all the elders were slaughtered by the Defiled.

Only to see it wither and die, no matter how hard she fought to save it… just like Nephis had watched the village she built be swallowed by the darkness in the Second Nightmare. Until she was the only one left alive, just like Nephis had been the only one to survive.

Ananke patted Neph's hand and smiled.

"It is alright, my Lady. Ah… it happened a long time ago, anyway."

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched. Looking away, he asked in a perfectly even tone:

"That Defiled… he must have been strong. If the Outsiders were the most powerful among you, then not just any creature could have killed them all. Still… just in case I get a chance to meet him one day… is there a way I can recognize him?"

'I'm going to kill that bastard.'

The young woman lingered for a while, then sighed.

"Yes, my Lord. It was not just any Defiled, indeed. The one who came to Weave is infamous enough that even we had heard of him. It was the Mad Prince."

He frowned.

"The Mad Prince?"

Ananke nodded.

"He is called Mad Prince, or the Prince of Madness. That fiend is one of the Six Plagues."

She shivered and looked away, as if suddenly uneasy.

"The Six Plagues are not the most powerful of the Defiled, and neither are they the most ancient. However, they are the most feared and loathsome. Mad Prince, Soul Stealer, Undying Slaughter, Torment, Devouring Beast, and the most harrowing of them all... the Dread Lord. Everyone on the Great River has heard their names. They are also called the Heralds of the Estuary, sometimes."

The young priestess frowned.

"Some even say that the Dread Lord is the true ruler of Verge, and that all Defiled submit to his commands. If so… maybe he was the one who sent the Mad Prince to Weave. I doubt it, though. I am not sure if that thing can be controlled by anyone, so he must have come of his own accord."

Nephis, who had been listening silently for a while, suddenly asked in a steady tone:

"The… Dread Lord is said to be the ruler of Defilement? What about the First Seeker? What power do he and the other five Plagues possess? What Rank and Class are they?"

Ananke smiled helplessly.

"I am sorry, my Lady. Weave is far away from the other human cities, so whatever news used to reach us was vague and fragmentary. The First Seeker… no one had seen him in a long, long time. Some say that he has turned into a mindless mass of rotting flesh because of the Defilement. Some say that he was severely wounded by the Serpent King and is yet to recover.

Some say that the Dread Lord has subjugated and imprisoned him."

She lingered.

"As for the Six Plagues, we knew very little of them. The Soul Stealer is said to possess the ability to wear the skin of those he kills. The Devouring Beast is immensely ferocious and feeds on human flesh. Torment is known for subjecting her victims to harrowing torture. Undying Slaughter is eternally consumed by insatiable bloodlust.

The Dread Lord… no one has ever survived facing him, so his powers are unknown."

The young priestess smiled bitterly.

"I can tell you about the Mad Prince, though. He is a raving lunatic who seems to be as murderous as he is tormented by his own madness. He looks human, or at least human-shaped. His clothes are tattered, and his face is a mass of scars, which look to have been inflicted by his own nails. He is said to wear a tarnished crown, but I haven't seen it myself.

At first glance, he appears rather pitiful… however, beneath that ragged surface hides a vile and hateful monster."

She gritted her teeth and looked at the scarred buildings surrounding the plaza.

"His powers… are that of a sword saint. But his swordsmanship is as mad as he is himself. It is violent and utterly chaotic, yet cruel and savagely lethal. He finds joy in tormenting his victims, then grows indifferent to their pain the next moment. The most terrifying thing about him, though, is that his madness spreads like a disease. Other than that… perhaps I did not even get to see his true power.

He tore our elders apart with just his blade, as if they were weak children."

Nephis glanced at her own sword, then asked somberly:

"What about his Rank and Class?"

Ananke lowered her head.

"It was… hard to tell. He is of the Corrupted Rank, I think. As for his Class... I am almost certain that he is a Titan."

Chapter-1310: Forsaken

'A Corrupted Titan…'

Sunny's face grew dark. The memories of Falcon Scott flashed in his mind, bringing with them a bitter taste. It was another city that had been destroyed by a Corrupted Titan, even if the scale and swiftness of destruction was different.

He remained silent for a few moments, then asked quietly:

"Aren't Titans usually… huge?"

Ananke hesitated, then shrugged. Her azure eyes were crestfallen.

"Most are. But some aren't. More than that, the Defiled… they were humans once. Their path to profane power is unique."

He nodded, feeling a deep sense of unease. A Corrupted Titan… if one of these Six Plagues was indeed as powerful as the Winter Beast, then just how terrifying the Dread Lord would be?

Still, Sunny felt a dark and scathing desire to kill that Mad Prince.

It was strange, really… he had met all kinds of horrid Nightmare Creatures, but knowing that the mad butcher who destroyed Weave had been a human once filled him with dark wrath.

'Just how low can a person fall…'

Odious. The Mad Prince, whoever he had been before succumbing to Corruption, was simply odious. Such a vile creature had no right to exist.

Sunny gritted his teeth, thinking about how many of the abominations he had slain in the past were former humans as well. After thousands of years of Corruption, the distinction was all but

erased, but... here in the Nightmare, it felt different.

Nephis, meanwhile, had another question. Looking at the forlorn vista of Weave with a frown, she hesitated for a few moments, then asked softly:

"Ananke… you said that the Outsiders were the most powerful warriors of your city. The Mad Prince easily killed them all. Wouldn't that mean that he could have killed all the Riverborn, as well? Why did he spare you?"

Sunny grimaced. He was asking himself the same questions, but didn't want to speak it aloud in fear of hurting the young priestess more than she had already been hurt.

Ananke remained silent for a while, her head lowered. Eventually, she took a breath and said quietly:

"Maybe he wanted us to suffer longer. Maybe he needed us to live some more, for whatever reason. Maybe he simply did not care. The Riverborn… he did kill some. However, then, he stayed his sword and kneeled in front of the girl he spared. She was a child who had just recently arrived from the House of Youth.

He asked her a question, then left."

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other somberly. She asked:

"What did the Defiled ask?"

The young priestess lingered, then slowly shook her head.

"He asked her… do you wish to live? She said that she did. Hearing that, the Mad Prince burst into laughter, wiped his bloody sword on her tunic, and disappeared. He never returned, and since all our elders were dead, we never heard about him again."

'Insane bastard.'

Sunny frowned, remembering the piece of flotsam that he had drifted on for the first couple of days in the Nightmare. It was a tenuous connection at best… but why had the Mad Prince asked the girl what

she wished? Was he, perhaps, the lunatic who had carved the frantic runes into the ancient wood?

If so, then maybe the Six Plagues had already become five. Considering that the piece of flotsam had seemed like a fragment of a destroyed vessel, the Defiled Titan might have perished in a battle with one of the harrowing Nightmare Creatures upstream.

That said, there was a very troubling thing about connecting Sunny's improvised raft to one of the Defiled from Verge. There were letters of the waking world alphabet among the runes, too… how the hell would Mad Prince know them?

'Damnation…'

It was all too eerie and mysterious.

Shaking his head, Sunny took one last glance at the drowned square. The fierce battle that had taken place here must have fractured the foundation of the artificial island, which was why it became flooded... he sighed and turned to Ananke.

"We still have to gather supplies, right?"

She nodded.

Sunny pulled the young woman away from the square and said in a soft voice:

"Then show us around Weave. We can get them on the way."

Ananke smiled a little, while Nephis threw him a grateful glance over her shoulder.

'If Ananke wants us to remember her city, then it's the least we can do. I'll make sure to write a detailed research paper after returning to NQSC, so that everyone in the waking world could learn about it, too.'

Sunny smiled.

"You know, Ananke, I am a well-respected professor in the future."

She looked at him with a hint of confusion in her azure eyes.

"A… professor?"

He nodded.

"A teacher. I teach young Awakened how to survive and provide for themselves in the wilderness. At the most famous academy in the world, no less! However, our knowledge of the intricacies of surviving in marine environments is not that extensive. I am sure I will gain a lot from learning about Weave. Then, I'll be able to teach my students about it, as well.

They'll be thanking me with tears in their eyes!"

The young priestess seemed more confused than touched. Sunny frowned.

"What is it?"

She shook her head slightly.

"No, it's nothing. But, my Lord… aren't you a food merchant in the future? How can you also be a teacher?"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched. He remained silent for a few moments, then answered stoically:

"Learned people also have to eat, don't they? That's just how great I am. Respected academic, renowned warrior, accomplished military commander, thriving entrepreneur… I am the picture of a perfect gentleman."

Ananke looked at him, then nodded with bright sparks in her azure eyes.

"My Lord is amazing!"

As Sunny grinned, Nephis added under her breath:

"...And so very modest."

His grin dimmed, but only for a moment.

Nodding energetically, Sunny agreed.

"Indeed, amazing is a word that can be used to describe me…"

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They traveled across Weave to collect everything needed for the long journey ahead. Even after long years of being abandoned, the city still seemed to be in a relatively good shape. However, beneath the beautiful surface, it had already started to crumble.

Sunny knew that Weave was not going to exist for much longer. Maybe in a decade or two, the floating city was going to break apart and be swallowed by the currents of the Great River, disappearing forever under the waves.

Before it did…

They gathered fruit from the wild groves and other supplies from various caches that Ananke had established throughout the city. There was food, spices, wine, tea leaves, and necessities that one would need to travel the Great River.

There were items, as well. The weapons and armor that the people of Weave had crafted and used were of inferior quality to the powerful Memories that Sunny and Nephis wielded, but they were able to collect a lot of things that would make traversing the Tomb of Ariel easier — from simple blankets and cutlery to fishing nets sturdy enough to capture Nightmare Creatures and sail repair kits.

Everything went into the Covetous Coffer.

As they moved from one district to another, Ananke also shared stories of Weave and its people with them. How they lived, what rituals they observed, what passions drove them and what vices they sometimes succumbed to.

There were interesting details about the everyday lives of the River People and entertaining anecdotes. Sunny really learned a lot from hearing these stories, and the more he learned, the more amazed he

became.

Their world was so different from anything he knew, and so, they had adapted to its strange circumstances with the tenacious ingenuity inherent to all humans.

Their knowledge of how to survive on the Great River had been built over many generations of persistent, relentless learning and unceasing improvement.

Humans were the most adaptable of species, indeed.

When Ananke started to tell them about Weave, there was a shadow of sadness in her eyes. However, as she remembered the people from her past, they gradually grew bright and warm.

A sweet smile appeared on her lips.

…But the more the young priestess spoke, the more despondent Sunny became.

He hid his expression and stared at the empty streets of the desolate city, his own eyes veiled by somber darkness.

'It's unfair…'

Ananke had been nothing but kind to them, so it was unfair. Sunny and Nephis were going to leave Weave to travel into the distant past and challenge the Nightmare, but she… she could never leave.

Because she was Riverborn.

After guiding the two of them as far as she could, the young priestess was going to return to the crumbling city. And live the rest of her life here, alone and forsaken.

Sunny's heart was heavy, and his hatred of the Mad Prince burned darker. Looking away, he gritted his teeth.

'Curse that vile bastard...'

Chapter-1311: Temple of the Nightmare Spell

Consumed by despondence, Sunny tried to find solace in anger. But it was of no use. Then, Sunny tried to remind himself that the Ananke he knew was just an apparition conjured by the Spell… the real Ananke — the true Priestess of the Nightmare Spell who had lived in the real Tomb of Ariel — was long dead, her spirit and bones taken by the Great River.

She had never met Sunny and Nephis. She had never traveled to the far reaches of the future, or made delicious small pies for two complete strangers.

In fact, it was not at all clear if the real Ananke shared the same fate as the one he knew. The Serpent King had brought many challengers into the Nightmare, after all — their actions had to have changed the flow of events within this version of the Tomb of Ariel.

Perhaps the real Weave was never destroyed by one of the Six Plagues, or had been wiped out entirely long before Ananke was born.

But telling himself that Ananke was not real did not help either. It never did. Be it the First Nightmare, the Second, or the Third, Sunny could not help but treat the people he met as real.

With a heavy sigh, he turned to look at the magnificent structure they were approaching. It was an unusual one. Much larger than most buildings in Weave, it was situated in the very heart of the city, on a solitary island-ship that floated some distance away from the rest.

The artificial island was connected to the neighboring ones with rope bridges of white silk, resembling a spider sitting at the center of a vast web.

The structure itself was tall and imposing, built of roughly cut black stone. Tattered white banners were hanging from its walls, fluttering in the wind. It looked nebulous and sinister, like a temple of some dark deity.

…Sunny had an idea who that deity was.

Looking up, he saw a lonely figure standing on the roof of the numinous temple, looking down at the desolate ruin of Weave. The black silk of its long hair and tunic remained motionless despite the strong wind. He couldn't see the figure's face from the distance, but silhouetted against the azure sky, it seemed strangely grim.

'There you are.'

The Sin of Solace had finally shown himself after hiding somewhere for a long time. And yet, the wraith was simply observing the ghost city from above instead of tormenting Sunny with snide remarks… its behavior had been getting stranger and stranger ever since the start of the Nightmare.

'Well, good. Stay away for as long as you want, you won't be missed.'

Paying attention to the apparition through one of the shadows, Sunny followed Ananke across one of the rope bridges. As they got closer to the ominous temple, Sunny and Nephis felt a strong sense of unease… however, the young priestess looked unperturbed. If anything, her expression grew calmer.

"This is the last place we will visit in Weave."

Even her voice sounded lighter.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked in a somewhat stifled tone:

"Is this… the temple of Weaver?"

Ananke shook her head with a faint smile.

"No, my Lord. Weaver was elusive and had no desire to be worshiped. It is useless to worship the Demon of Fate, anyway… no matter how

virtuous you are and how many offerings you make, fate will always remain uncaring, unchanged, and inevitable."

She pointed to this dark temple.

"No, this… is the temple of the Nightmare Spell. Of the gift Weaver has given us to rely on instead of the gods, the daemons, and of fate itself."

'Of fate itself…'

Sunny was once again faced with the fact the Demon of Fate seemed to have created the Spell to resist the very thing that was supposed to be the source of their power.

'Maybe Weaver was bound by the chains of fate, just like I am bound by them, too.'

The sudden thought was both ominous and chilling. If even the Demon of Fate had not been able to escape its clutches, then how could Sunny ever hope to succeed where Weaver had failed?

Still… despite everything that had happened, he still wanted to be free. That primal desire was rooted deep within his soul, smoldering, too vast and searing to be put out by shallow things like knowledge or wisdom.

Even though Sunny had learned that there was no such thing as true freedom — at least not without sacrificing everything one held dear — he still stubbornly clung to the desperate wish of breaking free of his bonds. It was just that the tumultuous twists and turns of his strange life had dampened that fiery hope a little.

He sighed, then glanced at Nephis with a guarded expression.

…She was not going to do something extreme like burning the temple of the Spell down, was she?

Ananke might have been sincerely devoted to them, but Sunny doubted that the young priestess would just watch silently as her home was destroyed. And although it was sometimes easy to forget because of her gentle temperament, she was still a true Saint.

Even if she wasn't, Sunny simply did not want to fight Ananke.

Luckily, Nephis seemed to be holding back her hatred for the sake of their kind guide. She had been raised by her grandmother, after all. Even though Neph had not shown it, meeting Ananke must have pulled at the strings of her heart… which still existed, no matter how abused, neglected, and ravaged by torment it was.

"Let's hurry inside."

Oblivious to the hidden conflict between her faith and the people she considered to be its apostles, the young priestess headed toward the gates of the sinister temple with a smile on her lips.

Sunny and Nephis followed, neither of them saying anything.

Soon, they passed through the dark entrance and found themselves within a vast hall. Its interior was shrouded in darkness, creating a solemn and mysterious atmosphere — for everyone except Sunny, of course, who could see everything just fine. Narrow beams of stark sunlight were falling from the elaborately carved light wells in the ceiling, intertwined in a complicated pattern…

The Temple of the Nightmare Spell looked frightening and sinister on the outside, but its interior was quietly beautiful. The intricate tapestry of falling light resembled the breathtaking weave of the inner workings of the Spell, while the darkness of the vast hall was like the lightless void between dream and reality where it was hiding.

It was… strangely peaceful here.

What caught Sunny's eye, however, were the white tapestries of enormous spiderwebs growing freely between the columns and support beams of the hall.

He shifted uncomfortably and pointed to them, mentally preparing for battle:

"I... think an abomination did make a nest in the ruins."

Ananke looked at him in confusion for a moment, then chuckled. Her melodious laughter echoed under the roof of the dark hall.

"No need to be alarmed, my Lord. The spider silk has always been here. No one knows what the Demon of Fate looks like, you see… which is why they are often depicted as a spider. Because of that, spiders were akin to sacred animals to us followers of Weaver. It was forbidden to harm a spider or its web, and we lived peacefully side by side with many."

She swept her gaze across the interior of the temple, her eyes growing wistful.

"I spent my youth in this temple, learning the duties of a priestess from my mother. The spiders who lived here were my friends. They are all gone now, of course… fate wasn't merciful to them, either. But their silk remains."

Sunny gave the young woman a strange look.

'So, little Ananke was friends with spiders...'

She… must have been one hell of a creepy girl.

But then again, who was he to judge? Sunny had never been a well-adjusted child himself.

'At least I didn't have to deal with all this sticky web. Gods, living in this temple must have been annoying!'

As he thought that, his gaze finally settled on a mass of roughly cut stone towering in the center of the hall. It resembled a wide pillar that had been broken by a devastating blow and then damaged by unbearable heat, its upper part deformed like a melted candle. The widest beam of sunlight fell vertically on the stone pillar, bathing it in blinding white radiance.

Walking closer, Sunny noticed that the whole mass of stone was covered by engravings. There had been many scenes depicted on it once, it seemed, but now, only one remained.

He shivered.

Cut into the ancient stone, an enormous gate was depicted, its titanic surface wrapped in unbreakable chains. In front of it, a tall figure

stood, the shape and form of its body hidden by a dark mantle. Only the face could be seen… or rather, the mask. The mask of a fearsome demon with ferocious fangs and a crown of three twisting horns.

Drawn to the stone image, Sunny felt his blood stir. Of course, he knew whose figure was carved into the broken pillar.

…It was Weaver.

Chapter-1312: Ancient Mural

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at the broken pillar. Eventually, he turned to Ananke and asked in a hesitant tone:

"What is this?"

The young priestess approached the mass of dark stone and bowed her head. After a few moments of reverent silence, she straightened and looked at him with a proud smile.

"It is one of the greatest relics of Weave, my Lord. This column was brought into the Tomb of Ariel by my elders, and then carried all the way here after their exile. It depicts the deeds of Weaver, from birth to the bestowal of the Nightmare Spell to my people."

Her smile dimmed.

"...However, as you can see, the column has been severely damaged over the ages. Now, only this one image remains."

Sunny frowned and stared at chains wrapped around the titanic gate. For whatever reason, just looking at them made him feel deeply uncomfortable.

"But what is its meaning?"

His voice was full of both curiosity and apprehension.

Ananke stepped closer to the broken pillar and studied the ancient engraving for a few moments in solemn silence. Then, she said in a melodious tone:

"This is a fragment of the mural that tells the story of one of Weaver's greatest deeds. The story of how the wandering daemon braved the eternal abyss."

The frown on Sunny's face deepened. He briefly glanced at Nephis and said:

"The… eternal abyss? Do you mean the primordial void?"

The young priestess nodded.

"Yes. After the gods sealed the void, Weaver was the only one who managed to enter it. Or, rather, the only one of those who had entered it who managed to return alive. At least that is what the legends say."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

He knew that the gods had sealed the eternal void, from which they were born. He also knew that the unknown were, most likely, the creatures of that void, while the Unknown was a specific being that had somehow given life to the seven daemons.

And that the reflection of either the former or the latter was forever frozen in the depths of Weaver's eyes.

Was that how the Demon of Fate had ended up carrying the reflection of the unknown within their pupils? By entering the void and witnessing its horror?

If so… Sunny wasn't sure if the depiction on the pillar had anything to do with how that event had happened. He doubted that there was an actual gate, no matter how impressive, that barred the way into the eternal void. What kind of gate could seal something that was much greater and more ancient than even the gods?

He also was uncertain that Weaver had actually physically entered the void. Of course, it was possible… but there was another probability, as well.

The strings of fate stretched from the past into the future. The Demon of Fate had obviously been much more capable of looking at them than Sunny was…

What if Weaver had simply traced the great tapestry of fate all the way back to its origin? To the point when the world had not existed

yet, and all there was was a vast and ever-changing void?

If so, then using the [Where is My Eye?] enchantment was much more perilous than Sunny had thought… and he already considered it deadly. In fact, now that he knew that simply knowing certain things could corrupt living beings, he saw the ability to perceive the strings of fate in a new light.

'Dangerous…'

Of course, there was still the possibility that Weaver had indeed ventured into the eternal void physically. Maybe that was how they had ended up having to sever their arm in the Ebony Tower... although the timing did not really make sense for that to happen.

He remained silent for a bit, then asked in a dry tone:

"And why, exactly, did Weaver do such a thing?"

Ananke smiled.

"Weaver believed that knowledge was the origin of power…"

'Yeah, I heard as much.'

"...and that was the reason they had ventured into the eternal abyss. To find the answer to the greatest of secrets."

Nephis was looking at the ancient mural. Hearing these words, she frowned slightly, and asked:

"What secret?"

The young priestess laughed.

"How would mortals like us know? Some legends say that the Demon of Fate wanted to gain knowledge of the origin of the gods. Others say that it was Weaver's own origin that they sought to uncover. Perhaps it was both."

Sunny stared at her for a moment.

'...Perhaps the two are one and the same.'

Ananke shook her head.

"Whatever it was that Weaver had learned in the abyss… is not that important, really. What matters more is that witnessing the eternal void gave the Demon of Fate the first reason to create the Nightmare Spell — that is what we, its priests, believe. So while this mural does not depict the inception of the Nightmare Spell, it does depict the inception of the idea of it.

Which is why the remains of this column is the greatest relic of Weave."

Sunny tilted his head.

'What? What does the eternal void have to do with the Nightmare Spell? That's the first time I'm hearing about this.'

Wasn't Ananke contradicting herself? Before, she had said that the purpose of the Nightmare Spell was to give living beings a chance to save themselves from the annihilation of the Doom War.

But then again, she was a priestess, and religious beliefs were rarely bound by reason. Contradictions were par for the course, and for the same reason, Sunny had to take everything Ananke said with a grain of salt.

Still… there could be some truth to what she said.

The young priestess bowed to the broken pillar again, then walked away with light steps.

"My Lord, my Lady… come! I will show you the rest of the temple."

Sunny and Nephis exchanged a glance, both pondering the meaning of the ancient mural. Neither of them knew what to make of it, so they followed Ananke in silence.

Soon, the three of them settled for sleep. Tired after the long journey and the forlorn eeriness of Weave, Sunny fell into the embrace of dreams almost instantly.

…That night, he saw a nightmare.

In the nightmare, Sunny was a spider with one of his eight legs broken off. He was crawling across the stone floor, consumed by fear.

Behind him, broken chains were falling down with a deafening clangor, and a titanic door stood wide open, its dark maw hiding indescribable horror.

Sunny crawled and crawled, but no matter how he strained himself, the horrifying gate only drew closer.

Chapter-1313: Nightmare Within Nightmare

Sunny dreamt of a titanic gate that stood wide open, something boundless and entirely alien hiding in the darkness of its colossal maw. He was a spider with a severed leg, crawling away as broken chains fell to the ground all around him.

His mind was consumed by terror, while his heart…

His heart was full of a cold, bitter feeling of betrayal and regret.

'Escape… I must escape…'

Sunny pushed his small body across the stone floor. There were beautiful webs veiling the vast hall of the temple, their silk threads weaved into a grandiose tapestry. A spark flew, and a moment later, the webs were engulfed in fire.

They disappeared in a flash, leaving behind only clouds of acrid smoke that obscured the entire world.

At least he couldn't see the harrowing gate anymore.

Suffocating, he crawled through the smoke, and slowly, torturously, the terror devouring his soul dissipated. Sunny felt as if he had escaped the immediate danger… however, he was hopelessly lost. There was nothing except for searing heat and the dark glow of spreading flame around him.

His body was already starting to grow unbearably hot.

He froze for a moment, resting and trying to find the way out of the smoldering inferno. Then, for a moment… he felt a breeze caressing his singed carapace from somewhere ahead.

'There…'

Sunny rose to his seven feet and limped forward as fast as he could.

Soon, he left the smoke and the fire behind.

There was a silent expanse of still water around him now. The smoke was gone, but a thick mist took its place. It swirled and moved, flowing slowly past the shivering figure of the small spider.

'Where am I?'

Sunny took a step and discovered that he could somehow walk on the surface of the water — just like he could within the Soul Sea. Advancing hesitantly, he ventured deeper into the fog. Some time passed — perhaps only a few minutes, perhaps an eternity — and he had lost all sense of direction.

There was nothing but mist in the world.

…Until something else appeared in the grey void.

Sunny trembled.

There, ahead of him, someone… something… was sitting on the calm surface of the water, staring down. The figure was dressed in tattered rags, its gaunt body hidden from view. It seemed like a human, or was at least human-shaped. The man's dirty hair was hanging like seaweeds, and his face was hidden from view.

A jagged band of dark metal rested on his head like a tarnished crown.

Suddenly, Sunny felt cold.

'The... the Mad Prince?'

It was one of the six Heralds of the Estuary... one of the Six Plagues.

The creature in front of him looked rather pitiful, but it was still a Corrupted Titan. He was in dire danger.

Luckily, the Defiled abomination did not seem to notice the small spider… Mad Prince was sitting motionlessly, staring at his own reflection with an absent expression. It was as though he existed in an entirely different reality.

A moment later, Sunny suddenly felt profound relief. A simple realization dispelled his fear and unease:

'...I'm sleeping. It's a dream.'

Of course, it was. Sunny was not a spider. He was currently in the temple of the Nightmare Spell, near Nephis and Ananke — not in the middle of a boundless sea, lost in the mist. The Corrupted Titan in front of him was not real, and the danger the creature represented was not real either.

'Thank the gods…'

As Sunny thought that, he was not a spider anymore. However, he was also not himself — instead, Sunny was tall and nebulous. He had eight nimble arms, one of them crafted out of pristine white porcelain. His slender figure was veiled by a dark mantle, and a mask of black polished wood hid his features.

Looking down from his towering height, Sunny studied the pitiful creature in front of him. The Mad Prince did not look that frightening, especially for a Titan. However…

For some unknown reason, the hunched figure filled Sunny with dread. It was just too… too familiar…

As if sensing a gaze, the tattered man suddenly shifted and slowly raised his head. A dreadful face that seemed like a ghastly mask of countless scars and two dark eyes burning with unfathomable madness revealed themselves, making Sunny take an involuntary step back.

Then, a whisper that was like broken glass resounded, scratching at his ears.

The Mad Prince whispered:

"...Who dares dream about me?"

And just like that, the relief Sunny felt was destroyed.

'W—what? He knows that this is a dream? No, that is not possible. How?!'

The eyes of the Defiled slowly gained refocus, becoming sharp and crushing. Pressed down by the unbearable weight of harrowing insanity hidden in their dark depths, Sunny took another step back and held his breath.

'It's a dream, it's a dream...'

The creature's lips, meanwhile, twisted in a wicked smile.

"Ah… it's you. Which one are you?"

The Mad Prince suddenly froze, then groaned and struck his head with a fist.

"I can't, can't… can't remember. Ah, but it is also an answer."

His ugly face rippled, as if trying to assume a human expression.

"You're... neither. You are an impostor?"

The creature's voice suddenly grew dark and vicious:

"You… murderer…"

An unhinged laugh escaped his lips, and then, the Mad Prince slowly rose. His tattered rags moved, shrouded in mist…

As Sunny took another step back, desperately trying to wake up, the Defiled took a step forward.

"How about it, murderer? Come closer… I'll tell you a secret. You deserve that much..."

There was suddenly nowhere to go. The grey mist became solid, blocking all paths to retreat. And Sunny… Sunny was, indeed, curious. Curious against his will.

He was a great lover of secrets, after all…

As he shuddered, feeling his thoughts spin out of control, there was suddenly a presence between him and the Mad Prince. Someone else was standing there, blocking the view of the mad creature with his back.

It was a young man in a black tunic, with long raven-black hair and a grim expression on his pale face.

The Sin of Solace.

'What is he doing here?'

The wraith seemed uncharacteristically serious as he stared the Mad Prince down. Without turning his head, the apparition said in a voice that was neither snide nor mocking…

Instead, it was grave:

"What are you doing, fool? Summon your horse and get out of here! Hurry!"

Chapter-1314: Revelations of Madness

Shielded by the Sin of Solace, Sunny was suddenly capable of pushing through the mist again. He backed away as the Defiled smiled wider.

"Where are you going, murderer? Don't you want to learn a secret? You won't regret knowing it… ah, maybe you will…"

Sunny did not know what was happening, but he was sure of one thing — whatever it was that the Mad Prince wanted to tell him was not something he should ever learn.

Unless he wanted to become as mad and broken as the Defiled abomination was.

It was already crazy enough to be fighting for his life — or rather, for his humanity — within a dream.

Which he was dreaming inside the Third Nightmare.

Staggering away, Sunny called upon his Shadows.

Instantly, three figures rose from below. Taciturn Saint, scrawny Imp, and a tenebrous steed shrouded in darkness.

The Mad Prince exploded with laughter.

"Good, good… oh, this makes me feel nostalgic…"

'We will...'

...Saint was the first one to fall. Before she could even move, a sword suddenly flashed, followed by a turbulent whirlwind of surging mist. The graceful stone knight froze, a thin crack suddenly appearing on her onyx armor.

Then, as silently as she had been born, Saint crumbled into a thousand shards of black stone. A cloud of ruby dust exploded into the air, painting the still water crimson.

"Saint!"

Sunny's eyes widened, but before he could do anything, the Sin of Solace pushed him away.

"Run, you bastard! She's not real!"

The Imp was second. The little fiend hesitated, visibly scared by the tattered figure of the mad Titan. However, then, it bravely jumped forward, reaching for the flesh of the Defiled with his claws. The invisible sword whistled again, and the scrawny figure suddenly staggered.

With liquid flames flowing out of Imp's mouth, he looked at Sunny with a frightened expression. Then, his eyes grew dim, and his little head slid off his neck, falling into the water with a quiet splash.

'Ah…'

Sunny felt as if his own mind was on the verge of breaking. Pressing down the tempest of pain and guilt raging in his heart, he gritted his teeth and turned away.

His hand grasped Nightmare's mane, and with a stifled scream, he jumped onto the stallions back.

The dark courser was already galloping away, away… away through the swirling mist.

The Mad Prince's laugh reached them from behind.

"Where are you going, murderer?! I am… not done… with you…"

Sunny did not turn to look back. Gripping the sides of Nightmare with his thighs, he raised both hands and pressed them to his ears.

'Don't listen… don't listen…'

However, he still heard it. The voice of the Sin of Solace, who said with a hint of resignation in his hateful, familiar voice. Sunny's own voice.

"Damn lunatic… are you trying to steal my job?"

He had never been so happy to have a wraith born from the whisper of the Demon of Dread stuck in his head before.

Nightmare flew through the mist, and soon, the veil of it obscured the Mad Prince and the Sin of Solace, muffling their voices until nothing except silence remained.

Sunny had also turned into himself… finally. He had a human body once again, as well as two human hands. The dark mantle was replaced by the soft silk of the Shroud of Dusk.

Looking down, he patted the black steed on the shoulder and let out a shaky breath.

"I… I think we are safe now."

Then, he hesitated for a moment and added in a small voice:

"But do you think… that I can wake up now?"

Nightmare huffed and struck the surface of the still water with his hooves, soaring high into the air.

As they rose higher and higher, the mist grew thinner and thinner, until eventually a ray of sunshine broke through its blinding veil.

And as soon as it did…

Sunny woke up with a start.

"Argh!"

He sat up, covered in cold sweat. With his heart beating wildly, Sunny grabbed at his chest and froze, looking around the dark room of the desolate temple. Slowly, his panic started to dissolve.

'A dream… it was just a dream.'

Sunny slowly exhaled, then shuddered and shook his head.

No… it might have been a dream, but it definitely had not been just a dream. He did not know what kind of power could have allowed the Mad Prince — who was most likely either dead already or far, far away — to appear in his nightmare. However, he was certain that the creature he had met in the dream was not a simple figment of his imagination.

Sunny did not know whether the tattered abomination he had faced was the Defiled Titan himself or some echo left behind by his passing, but he knew that hearing the secret the abomination wanted to share would have been the end of him.

'Gods damn it... even the dreams aren't safe here.'

As his heart calmed down a little, he sat in silence for a while, trying to gather his thoughts. There were a lot of strange things about that dreadful dream… however, before he could consider them carefully, a sudden worry clouded his mind.

Sunny hurriedly sent his shadows to check on Nephis and Ananke. Making sure that both were sleeping peacefully in the neighboring rooms, he then shuddered at the memory of his Shadows being destroyed and proceeded to summon them one after another.

He called upon the dark courser first. As the Sin of Solace said, Saint and Imp should not have been real — the black steed could be summoned into his dream because that was the nature of Nightmare's powers, but the other two were different. So, only Nightmare had actually faced the Mad Prince… most likely.

The black stallion appeared in the shadows, keeping to his intangible form. He seemed agitated, but otherwise unharmed. Relieved, Sunny let out a long sigh.

"...Thank you, buddy. You really saved my hide there."

Dismissing Nightmare, he summoned Saint next. The graceful knight appeared out of the darkness, as stoic and indifferent as ever. She

was unharmed. Feeling as if a great burden had been lifted off his heart, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

"You're safe. Thank the gods…"

Saint gave him a strange look, but remained silent… well, of course she did.

"Go back now… no, actually, stay here. Keep watch throughout the night, alright?"

The graceful knight stared at him for a few moments, then turned away and silently left the room to stand guard in the corridor.

Sunny took a deep breath and rubbed his face.

Now, only Imp remained.

He summoned the scrawny goblin, then scratched the back of his head.

'Ah, right… that little rascal is still stuck digesting the armor of the Black Turtle. Damn it, when will he stop lazing around and…'

But before Sunny could finish the thought, a frightening figure suddenly rose from the shadows… towering above him like a demon forged out of dark steel and sharp blades…

"Argh, what the?!"

…Unbeknownst to Sunny, the little rascal had already awakened from his slumber.

Only he wasn't so little anymore.

Chapter-1315: Steel Devil

Sunny had grown accustomed to calling his youngest Shadow an imp… however, now the Ravenous Fiend was finally worthy of his fearsome name.

The creature in front of Sunny could not be called little, nor could it be called scrawny. It was almost as tall as Saint, towering above him like a demonic warrior whose body had been forged out of dark steel in the infernal flames of hell.

There were a lot of similarities with how Imp had looked during their last battle in Falcon Scott… but there were also differences.

The original Ravenous Fiend had been tall, but gaunt. His body had been covered in thick plates of black bone armor, and he was as ferocious as he was stealthy, like a vengeful wraith born out of hungry darkness.

The new and improved Imp, however, was not gaunt. Instead, he seemed like a knight clad in a suit of plate armor. That armor was not made out of bone, either — it was made out of a strange dark metal.

The ravenous Shadow had seemed like he was forged out of black steel before, but the look of his metallic body was changed now. It acquired a dark sheen and a glossy quality, as though the Transcendent Devil had been cast out of black silver or covered in a layer of dull chrome.

There were changes in the… design of his armor, too.

It was as though Fiend had been forged out of countless broken swords. There were curved blades growing from his elbows and knees, as well as ferocious spikes rising here and there from his dark armor.

His face was hidden behind the visor of a fearsome helmet, with twisting horns rising from it and a jagged line breaking its surface where the fiend's terrible mouth was hidden, brimming with dagger-like teeth.

His claws were like short swords, and in his ferocious eyes, infernal flames burned with intense heat.

'C—crap…'

And that demonic monstrosity… was currently staring at Sunny with an extremely nasty expression in its glowing orange-red eyes.

Sunny awkwardly cleared his throat.

"Ah… hey there, buddy."

Imp's mouth split in a sinister grin, releasing more heat and infernal glow.

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Wow! You... look great! I guess all that delicious magical steel I found and fed you… out of nothing but pure kindness, maybe… really did you some good, huh?"

He coughed.

"Say... you wouldn't be remembering all the times I kicked and berated you, would you? Or, you know… thinking about strange things like revenge… would you?"

Imp took a step forward, the glow of his demonic eyes and incinerating maw falling on Sunny's face. His grin widened, the sharp steel teeth glinting in the darkness.

His voice sounded like a roaring flame:

"Like… revenge…"

With that, Imp raised his hand.

In that moment, Sunny expression changed, and he added evenly:

"Because if you do… your master will have a good reason to find out just how sturdy this new body of yours is."

Imp's grin froze for a moment, and his hand did too.

He hesitated for a moment… and then carefully fixed a crease on Sunny's tunic.

The steel fiend growled politely:

"Master… good…"

Then, he backed away, stared at Sunny for a bit, and hurriedly left the room.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh, then smiled.

"Ah. They grow up so fast…"

One of his shadows followed Imp into the corridor to see what the little… the big guy was up to.

Moving too silently for a creature of his size and weight, the steel devil approached Saint and stopped next to her, as if to join her in guarding the rooms.

There they stood, Saint and Fiend.

…Imp was acting as nonchalantly as the taciturn knight was, but Sunny did not miss the fact that the bastard was puffing out his chest and secretly throwing glances at Saint, as if waiting for her reaction.

After a while, the stone knight finally turned her head and stared at the steel fiend indifferently. Imp seemed to have secretly held his breath.

Saint remained motionless for a while, then raised her hand and casually flicked the fiend's chest with a finger. After hearing a melodious ring, she tilted her head a little.

Finally, the graceful knight nodded curtly and turned away.

…Imp looked beyond himself.

Maintaining a stoic facade worthy of his ferocious appearance, he also looked away and returned to silently guarding the corridor.

However, the flames in his eyes were dancing jubilantly.

Sunny scoffed.

'This ugly idiot… ah, he's seriously cute…'

He shook his head, then summoned the runes to learn exactly what had changed about Ravenous Fiend, except for appearance.

The runes read:

Shadow: Ravenous Fiend.

Shadow Rank: Transcendent.

Shadow Class: Devil.

Shadow Description: [A pitiful little creature traveled through a nightmarish land...]

Shadow Attributes: [Lucky], [Marvel], [Ravenous], [Shadow Sworn], [Complete Steel body].

The [Greater Steel Body] had become [Complete Steel body]. Its description read:

Attribute Description: [This Shadow's body is forged out of sublime blessed steel and is without a flaw].

It seemed that consuming the silver armor of the Black Turtle had not only improved the quality of the alloy from which Imp's body was made, but also removed all the remaining imperfections from it.

Granted, Sunny was inclined to take its supposed flawlessness with a grain of salt. After all, he had recently learned that flaws were one of the universal laws of the world.

Still, if the Spell deemed it necessary to call Imp's newly evolved body flawless, he had to be very close to having no physical vulnerabilities.

It seemed... that Sunny finally had another powerful Shadow to face the most dire enemies side by side with.

Imp was now perfectly capable of participating in battles alongside Saint and Nightmare, reaching the fearsome level of power that a Transcendent Devil was supposed to possess.

With his indestructible steel body, which was a weapon in and of itself, as well as his dual affinity for shadows and flame, the ferocious fiend would be a terror on the battlefield.

'Good... just in time.'

Sunny's face grew somber.

Things had been calm for a while, ever since Ananke had found them.

But he knew that there were plenty of harrowing battles waiting for them in the depths of the Tomb of Ariel.

Chapter-1316: Limits of Power

Imp… or was Sunny supposed to call him Fiend now?... did not get new abilities. Which was logical, really, since the Black Turtle was only a Monster — and the gluttonous Shadow had not even consumed the flesh of the abominations, only its armor.

Still, the scrawny goblin had become a fearsome ogre. He was going to significantly increase Sunny's battle power, not the least because of his carefully chosen diet. Sunny had given up on feeding Ravenous Fiend a lot of valuable stuff so that his growth did not become muddled.

Imp's main affinities had to be established first — steel and shadows. The flames he had absorbed from the colossal body of the Sun Prince were a pleasant side effect, increasing the power of the steel devil's attacks… but what Sunny had really wanted was to make his youngest Shadow as indestructible as possible.

Saint possessed an incredible level of defense, which was only made greater by her masterful battle prowess. But Imp was different — if not guided cautiously, he could have ended up being vulnerable. Considering the types of situations Sunny often found himself in, that vulnerability was bound to result in him losing his first Shadow sooner rather than later.

Survivability was king. He had regrettably proven it himself over and over again, clinging to life by the skin of his teeth on many occasions.

Which was why Sunny was so impressed by how hard to kill the original Scavenger had been. He had experienced the toughness of the spiteful fiend's bone armor personally, after all, and wanted to make Imp at least as durable. If the ravenous Shadow managed to approach the level of defense Saint possessed, that would have been even better.

In that regard… Sunny seemed to have overshot his initial goal. By a lot.

Imp's [Complete Steel Body] was not only as durable as Saint's graceful body was, but vastly more so. His metal carapace was sturdier than her stonelike armor, and much more importantly, that durability encompassed the entire body of the ravenous devil, not just its surface.

Although Saint was hard to wound, she was actually quite vulnerable once her armor and resilient skin were breached. The internals of her miraculous stone body were well protected, but fragile. The ruby dust that flowed out of the wounds like blood was proof of that.

Ravenous Fiend, however, was now fully tempered, both outside and inside. There were no vulnerabilities that an enemy could exploit — at least not an enemy using physical attacks.

Which meant that while Imp could deliver fearsome blows, his true power lay in being nearly impervious to physical harm. He could become the shield of the Shadow Cohort.

'...Or a punching bag.'

Sunny scratched the back of his head and looked in the direction where Imp was standing, hidden from view by a wall, with a guilty expression. The poor guy had not realized what the future held for him, had he?

'Sorry, buddy…'

He shook his head and remained silent for a while, thinking.

There were two fully matured Transcendent Devils serving him now. Sunny himself had become unbelievably strong due to Shadow Dance, at least for an Ascended. If augmented by Nephis, his power was probably comparable to some Saints now — enough to give him a fighting chance, if nothing else.

If Sunny was assisted by his Shadows, most Saints would probably be the ones at risk, not him. And that was without Soul Serpent, who should have become the strongest of the Shadows by now.

…But still, that power was not enough. After experiencing the dire perils of the upper reaches of the Great River, and knowing that he would have to venture far downstream, into the distant past, Sunny knew that even his current ridiculous level of strength was not enough to slay the kind of adversaries he would be facing.

The problem was…

'I am almost at my limit.'

There were very few things he could realistically achieve in a short amount of time to increase his power even further. The only feasible one was helping Nightmare evolve into an Ascended Terror and unlock his [Dream Curse] Ability. That was going to happen relatively soon, but after that, Sunny would reach a dead end.

With a lot of effort, he could potentially become a Terror. But even that boost was not going to be significant enough to change the odds in his favor. More Memories, and stronger ones at that, were not going to cut it either.

Sunny had grown a lot — more than any Master in history had, perhaps — but now, his head was pressed against an indestructible ceiling. The only way for him to leap to a new height was by breaking that ceiling and becoming a Saint.

Which could only happen after the Nightmare, meaning too late. Of course, he had recently learned from Ananke that people could Transcend without the assistance of the Spell — that path was open to him, but sadly, Sunny did not have a hundred spare years or more to slowly learn how to do just that.

What was left, then?

He frowned.

'Actually… I am thinking about it all wrong.'

Sunny had been a loner for most of his life, and even after learning how to rely on others and trust his friends, he still put a lot of meaning into personal strength. Which was not exactly unwise… but, at the same time, served as an artificial limit.

Although he had not lived through Neph's Second Nightmare, the lesson she had learned there resonated with his own experiences. Personal strength was important, but it paled in comparison to true power.

Take Antarctica, for example… Sunny had achieved incredible things there, but he had not achieved them alone. The evacuation of hundreds of millions of civilians was only possible because the government had mobilized vast resources to send the First and Second Evacuation Armies into the Southern Quadrant.

Without the Irregulars, without the mundane soldiers and thousands of Awakened who had fought and died to save the people of Antarctica, Sunny would not have achieved anything.

His personal strength was nothing when compared to the united determination of all those brave people.

…It was the same here in the Third Nightmare.

Sunny had to destroy a dire enemy — the forces of Defilement populating the corrupted city of Verge and the Six Plagues that ruled it. Dread Lord, Torment, Undying Slaughter, Soul Stealer, Devouring Beast… and Mad Prince.

So why was he only thinking about his personal strength? Wasn't the power of his allies also his power?

Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai, Jet, and even Mordret. They were as much a part of his power as Saint, Imp, and Nightmare.

Since Sunny had reached the ceiling of what he himself could achieve as a Master, wouldn't it be wiser for him to put his efforts into empowering his allies?

'This is it.'

Shrouded in darkness, Sunny slowly nodded.

That was the path he had to take if he wanted to survive the Nightmare. After reaching Fallen Grace, he and Nephis had to find the rest of the cohort. And once they found them, Sunny had to make

sure that his friends — and Mordret too — grew as powerful as possible.

He had to make them into a force capable of defeating the Six Plagues.

For their sake, and also his own.

Sunny sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. The future… was daunting.

But when had it not been so?

Chapter-1317: Difficult Questions

Approaching the window, Sunny opened the heavy shutters and looked at the desolate landscape of Weave from the height of one of the Nightmare Spell Temple's bell towers.

The sky was veiled in impenetrable darkness. The waters flowing through the canals of the floating city glowed with iridescent radiance, bathing the empty streets in ethereal glow. Usually, the light of the Great River at night was dreamlike and beautiful, but contrasted against the forlorn desolation of Weave, it made for an eerie sight.

It was like a city of ghosts.

He sighed, thinking about the cruel fate that had befallen the followers of Weaver… and the creature that had driven them to extinction.

The Mad Prince.

A dark expression appeared on Sunny's face.

He was reluctant to think about his meeting with the Defiled Titan — or at least some vestige of the abhorrent creature that had found its way into his dreams. It almost felt as though thinking about the abomination would summon it here.

Nevertheless, Sunny had to consider what he had seen, and heard, in the harrowing dream. Because it was too ominous.

'I dreamt of being Weaver.'

The spider with a broken leg was, without a doubt, a representation

of the Demon of Fate. It was not surprising that Sunny had dreamt of the nebulous daemon after witnessing the mural in the grand hall of the temple, and neither was it unexpected that he had assumed the daemon's role in his nightmare.

Weaver's blood was running through Sunny's veins, after all, and he too had an innate affinity to fate. The latter was the reason for the former, in the end — it was because of being Fated that he had stumbled on the egg of the loathsome Thieving Bird and received the forbidden lineage of the sinister daemon.

Sinister… Sunny had actually never thought about Weaver in such terms before. Mostly because he had benefited greatly from their tenuous connection, but also because there was no reason to. In all honesty, he had admired the mysterious daemon, with no particular reason except for the fact that the Demon of Fate was an intelligent, cunning, and fearsome deity.

But the more Sunny learned about the end of the Dream Realm and the Nightmare Spell, the more ominous of a figure Weaver seemed. And how could they not… who could be more dangerous than a creature that wielded knowledge of fate itself?

Sunny and Nephis had argued about the nature of the Spell, whether it was a fundamentally benevolent force or not.

He was inclined to believe that it had been created for a noble purpose… which was not to say that it was not a vile and terrible curse for the humans of the waking world… but he was also starting to suspect that neither of them really understood the true intention and scope of what Weaver had done at all.

The Nightmare Spell seemed like a tool to make living beings stronger in the face of encroaching Corruption. But there were too many discrepancies between what was apparent and what was hidden beneath the surface. The Nightmares, the slow but inevitable escalation, the sheer convenience of it all…

What was Weaver's true goal? How had the rudimentary version of the Spell Ananke wielded grown to become the pervasive and nearly omnipotent power that seemed to be as absolute as the universal laws

of reality that the gods established?

Come to think of it, how had the Doom War ended? What had actually happened to the daemons, the gods… and Weaver? Where did the Corruption that had devoured the Dream Realm come from, and why?

Just like always, Sunny had no answers. More than that, these were not even the questions he had to ponder.

The Defilement was a form of Corruption that had spread from the Estuary, and there were six champions of it… Dread Lord, Devouring Beast, Undying Slaughter, Torment, Soul Stealer. And Mad Prince.

The Mad Prince, who seemed strangely familiar when Sunny had dreamt of him.

He shivered.

'...Why did he feel familiar?'

The Defiled horror seemed like a human… no, like a broken marionette of a human. He was like a flesh puppet worn by a boundless sea of madness, to the point where the madness seemed like the actual being, while the human body just seemed like its ragged shell.

Sunny still shuddered when he remembered the creature's eyes. The torment hiding in them… was like a chilling storm of insanity born from a thousand years of horror, agony, and knowledge.

Knowledge was the heaviest thing in the world, after all. As well as the origin of power.

And that was why he was very uncomfortable with the fact that the Mad Prince seemed so familiar.

Sunny had not noticed it at the start, because the abominable creature was too different from him. But when the Sin of Solace appeared… he had to admit to himself that the Defiled Titan and the sword wraith were eerily similar.

Which meant that Sunny and the Mad Prince were similar, too.

He stared at the ghostly landscape of Weave for a while.

'Have I… assumed the role of that abomination?'

Sunny and Nephis had discussed how strange their entry into the Nightmare was. Whose roles did they assume? Who could have been present that far upstream at the moment of their arrival?

He had also theorized that the Mad Prince might have died there, as evident by the piece of flotsam with deranged runes carved into it.

It was strange to think that a Corrupted Titan could have become an Ascended Tyrant… but not impossible. The Spell could have decided that it was the best and only option, slightly changing the rules. The Third Nightmare was different from the previous two, to begin with, with challengers entering it with their own bodies.

…That was one possibility.

The other, more harrowing possibility, was that the abominable madmen could have been the Sin of Solace from the future, conjured into the present by some strange quirk of the Great River. Ananke had said it herself that the flow of time in the Tomb of Ariel was often strange and unpredictable.

The Mad Prince… could also have been the future version of Sunny, who had either been devoured by the Corruption, or the Sin of Solace itself.

'No… no way. No way!'

He suddenly felt incredibly cold.

But it was too compelling of a theory to be discarded because of the outrage he felt at the thought of being able to turn into that bastard. The letters of the modern alphabet being mixed with the deranged runes, the ability to spread madness, the physical resemblance…

It was not only the Mad Prince, either. The description of the rest of the Six Plagues was also extremely ominous.

The Soul Stealer, who could wear the skin of those he killed. The Undying Slaughter, who was overcome by insatiable bloodlust. The Devouring Beast, who consumed the bodies of her slain foes… the Dread Lord, and Torment…

Didn't they sound like corrupted, twisted versions of the members of the cohort?

All except Nephis, who was incorruptible.

'It's too ridiculous of a thought.'

Sunny could reluctantly acknowledge that some form of time… distortion could have happened inside the Tomb of Ariel. He could even admit that it was quite possible for them to fail in conquering the Nightmare and succumb to Corruption.

However, what were the chances of all of them surviving that and becoming Saints in the process? The Six Plagues were vastly more powerful than the members of the cohort, to the point that an entire civilization of powerful Awakened had not managed to slay a single one of them.

Two civilizations, even, considering the King of Twilight and his people.

No, it was far more likely that Nephis and her cohort were pitted against Nightmare Creature resembling the perverse versions of themselves because of a little nudge from the Spell.

The Spell had shown itself to be fond of such ghastly, but poetic twists of fate, after all.

Still…

How had the runes of the waking world language ended up on the piece of flotsam?

Sunny remained motionless for a long time, looking at the desolate expanse of Weave.

Eventually, the glowing waters dimmed, and the seven suns emerged

from the river. Sunny sensed the shadows move in the adjacent rooms, telling him that Ananke and Nephis had woken up.

He closed his eyes for a few long moments. Trying to chase away the heavy thoughts, he then dismissed Saint and Imp.

It was time to meet the new day. Hopefully, he would get some answers after reaching Fallen Grace.

'I need to strengthen Nightmare as soon as possible.'

The Mad Prince had invaded his dreams once, and there was no guarantee that it would not happen again. Sunny needed to protect himself while he slept, and since helping the black stallion evolve was also the only way for him to strengthen himself in the short term, he could achieve both goals at once that way.

'I'm going to have to craft some Memories.'

Luckily, with the Crown of Twilight supplying him with essence, weaving strings of it to create Memories would not be as taxing and long of a process as it had been before.

Thinking about how many soul shards he had and what Memories to create, Sunny rubbed his face and went outside to meet his companions.

They were going to leave Weave soon.

Chapter-1318: Leaving Weave

Sunny, Nephis, and Ananke spent several days in the temple of the Nightmare Spell, resting and exploring the forlorn city as they prepared for the last leg of the journey. These days were strangely tranquil and peaceful, but also bittersweet.

It was because the three of them knew that their time together was coming to an end.

The young priestess, who had been their caretaker and guide for the last few weeks, was not going to be able to follow her wards to where they needed to go. Fallen Grace, the city of Dusk, lay far beyond the boundary of where she was allowed to exist.

Such was the fate of all Riverborn.

Sunny and Nephis were both painfully aware of what awaited Ananke in the future. That was why, even though they tried to hide their emotions, a dark shadow was cast over their hearts.

The young priestess herself, meanwhile, seemed at peace with her bitter fate. An easy smile often appeared on her lips, and she fully dedicated herself to making preparations to send the two of them on their way.

Sunny and Nephis were going to have to travel far downstream on their own. They needed supplies and knowledge to reach Fallen Grace without Ananke, so she was busy making sure they would have everything they needed.

They gathered various resources from all over the desolate ruins of Weave. The young priestess also taught them how to navigate the Great River and recognize various perils hiding in its depths. Nephis continued to learn how to steer the enchanted ketch, while Sunny spent his time weaving threads of shadow essence and studying the

Estuary Key.

Eventually, there was nothing left for them in the orphaned city. As the beautiful light of the seven rising suns suffused the cool morning air, Ananke led them through the empty streets for the last time and jumped lightly onto the deck of the graceful ketch.

"Come! We will sail downstream today."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, then silently followed her aboard the boat. The young priestess watched them with a smile, then nodded and gestured to the steering oar.

"My Lady, it is best if you practice steering while I am still with you. Remember our lessons. You can surely succeed!"

Nephis looked at her for a while, her face motionless. She hesitated a little before sitting down on the helmsman's bench and taking the oar.

Sunny, meanwhile, frowned.

"Wait... what about you? If we are going to sail away on the ketch, how are you going to get back to Weave?"

Ananke shook her head.

"Weave stretches far downstream, just like it does upstream. There are several island-ships we will visit before it is time for me to turn back. I will leave you at the Lower House of Parting, where there are other vessels for me to use."

He hesitated for a few moments, then nodded reluctantly. Sunny had not come to terms with how they would have to leave Ananke behind, still… but there was nothing he could do, and nothing he knew how to say.

They had no other choice.

… But the farewell was not upon them yet. Perhaps he would be able to find the correct words in the days to come.

With a sigh, Sunny lowered himself to the deck. Usually, Ananke would sit on the bench at the stern of the ketch, while Nephis would be opposite him at the middle point of the deck. Today, however, their familiar positions were reversed — Neph was holding the steering oar, while the priestess sat down near Sunny.

He had grown somewhat accustomed to how beautiful the young Ananke was, but looking at her directly still felt strange. Especially because of how bright her smile was, and how heavy his heart was.

"Thank you, my Lord."

Sunny looked at her somberly, surprised.

"Me? For what?"

The young priestess sighed lightly, then looked at the desolate landscape of Weave with a wistful expression.

"For wanting to learn about my birthplace so much. I am glad to have shared its stories with someone. Very much."

He lowered his head and remained silent for a few moments.

"...Sure. No problem."

At that moment, Nephis took a deep breath, and then said something in a resolute voice. The word that escaped her lips echoed from the walls of the canal, and a subtle ripple spread across the surface of the flowing water. It was as though the word itself contained an invisible power capable of reshaping the world.

Soon, a strong gale rose, filling the sails of the old ketch.

It was both similar and different from how Ananke summoned the wind. Neph's Shaping was more direct and crude, lacking stability… but, at the same time, it contained a wild and fearsome will. As a result, the gale summoned by the True Name of the wind was able to propel the boat forward despite not being as strong as what the young priestess had been able to call upon.

The Word they spoke was the same, but the result differed. It was

because of the nature of the Sorcery of Names — unlike other types of sorcery, which acted through fixed conduits like essence threads and runes, it used the Shapers themselves as the conduit.

Nephis was of a lower Rank than Ananke, so she couldn't channel the power of the Word as potently. But, at the same time, her body and soul were aflame with the divine lineage of Sun God… and more importantly, she possessed a True Name of her own.

Those with True Names were connected to the mystical side of the world much closer, would be influenced by the hidden powers of the world much more… and be able to exert greater influence in turn.

Which was why Nephis was able to control the ketch with a sufficient level of power despite not being a Saint like Ananke.

"You are doing great, my Lady! Speak the Names of Concealment next!"

Neph lingered, her face a little pale. The Sorcery of Names did not come without a cost, just like the other types of sorcery. Channeling a Word put a strain on the Shaper's body, as while uttering it did not consume essence, controlling the outcome did.

Eventually, she gritted her teeth and said the rest of the Names the priestess had taught her, arranging them into a Phrase.

The ketch flew through the canals. Soon, it broke free of the city boundaries and sped into the open expanse of the Great River, leaving the forlorn city behind.

They were once again traveling downstream, deeper into the past.

Chapter-1319: House of Youth

The next morning, they reached the first of the remote island-ships Ananke had told them about. It slowly appeared from beyond the horizon, illuminated by the dreamlike sunlight.

This one was different from the House of Parting. The artificial island was much larger, and instead of a solemn and solitary building, it encompassed a whole district. There were many houses, gardens, and water features, all of them bright and colorful. Despite the same desolation that reigned Weave, this place seemed strangely festive.

It was easy to imagine how full of vitality it had once been.

Ananke's eyes glistened with nostalgia. She smiled softly and said, her voice melodious:

"This… is the House of Youth."

Sunny and Nephis looked at the bright island-ship, wondering what its purpose was. The sight of it was a little uplifting, and a little sad. Contrasted against the beautiful atmosphere, the emptiness seemed even more poignant.

The young priestess sighed.

"This is one of the seven Houses that Riverborn spent their childhood and adolescence at."

She lingered for a moment, and then explained:

"As you can imagine, children grow up differently here on the Great River. From the moment they are born, their bodies are beholden to the currents of its time. If brought upstream, they will swiftly reach adulthood… at the same time, their parents will have to grow older if they wish to remain with their child.

In a span of a few generations, families will be torn apart, and a city will be broken into pieces."

Ananke shook her head.

"Of course, it is also cruel to thrust a child into adulthood while their mind remains immature. So, the Seven Houses exist. Actually… it is a bit strange for me to explain these things, since that is just how life in the Tomb of Ariel is. To me, it is the manner in which Outsiders grow up that seems odd."

She laughed.

"I couldn't believe my mother when she told me that kids outside just grow up inevitably, while remaining in the same place, and have no choice on when to become adults. How scary! Can you imagine?"

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, befuddled. After a while, he cleared his throat.

"Yeah, I can easily imagine. But, wait… what is the exact purpose of these Seven Houses?"

Fallen Grace was most likely built in the same way, so it would be good to know. Plus, he was simply curious.

The young priestess smiled:

"It is simple, really. When a man and a woman decide to have a child, they travel downstream, to the House of Birth. The children are born and spend the first months of their lives there."

She looked at the waters of the Great River and added, her voice wistful:

"As the mind of the child matures, they and their parents travel upstream to the next House, where the kids become toddlers. After a year or two, the family travels to the third House, and so forth. This way, kids have a chance to have proper childhoods.

It is a happy time for the families, and moving on to the next House is a big event for the children, akin to the Birthday Ceremony you

Outsiders have."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then nodded. The River People did not have the same perception of time as the rest of humans. They still counted time in months and years, but these measurements were simply traditions brought into the Tomb of Ariel by those who had come from the outside.

Although there were something akin to seasonal changes within the Tomb of Ariel, the idea of a solar year was meaningless here. So, the children growing up on the Great River would put much more meaning into traveling upstream and getting an older body than into an empty thing like getting older by an imaginary year.

Especially since their lives were not limited by the dwindling number of years that remained before they grew old and died.

Ananke noticed his contemplative expression and added:

"This last House, the House of Youth, is where our bodies reach the stage of the cusp of adulthood. The parents usually leave for the main city and leave the kids with other youths. Yet different kids reach mental maturity at different paces. Some spend just a few years here before moving on to reunite with their families. Some stay longer. Some lazy rascals even refuse to become adults for decades."

Her cheeks turned slightly pink.

"Uh… I might have been one of those rascals myself…"

Sunny smiled, imagining the dignified and wise elderly woman he knew avoiding the responsibilities of adulthood for as long as she could, getting into all kinds of mischief with the other young Riverborn.

Had Ananke really been such an unruly troublemaker once?

He shook his head.

"But wait. If that is true, then how would these youths have families of their own? They would turn into infants by traveling to the House of Birth, no?"

Ananke nodded.

"Indeed. That is why the whole city migrates some distance upstream each generation. That gives the young ones a chance to have children of their own. Of course, it also means that their parents grow a little older with each migration. But our lifespans are long… the future is more forgiving than the past. The eldest ones assume guidance roles in the Seven Houses, as well."

She remained silent for a few moments.

"Nevertheless, a city might reach a point where the older part of its population would not be able to migrate anymore. That never happened to Weave, since many died in the battles against the Corrupted, and those who survived too long usually chose to leave from the House of Parting. Our history also does not stretch that far.

But downstream, where the great cities of sybils used to be, that was how new settlements were created. The young split off to start life anew."

Sunny and Nephis remained silent, thinking about how bizarre the civilization of the Great River was, after all. The way of life of the River People was indeed completely different from the outside world. Even simple things like parenthood, childhood, and growing up were entirely unlike what they knew.

'Life always finds a way...'

Which was why it was even sadder to see it destroyed, how it had been here in Weave.

Ananke sighed.

"There had been a single migration after I left the House of Youth. So, I will be able to guide you past all the Seven Houses, to the House of Parting far downstream. It should not take us more than a few days."

With that, she turned to Nephis and smiled.

"In the meantime, my Lady, I will help you grow accustomed to controlling the ketch."

As she and Neph talked, Sunny looked at the bright buildings of the House of Youth, which were drawing closer and closer… and then slowly drifting past.

He was thinking about what Ananke's childhood must have looked like, as well as about the bleak and cold childhood of his own.

Wasn't it funny? The young priestess, who had been born in a tomb built by the Demon of Dread from the corpse of an Unholy Titan, clung desperately to her childhood, not wanting to become an adult. While he, who had been born in the waking world, couldn't wait to leave that bitter page of his life behind.

…And in the end, they had both ended up in this ketch together.

Sunny sighed.

'It would be nice if the kids of the future… the waking world's future… could live like her, and not like me.'

That was such a strange thought.

Chapter-1320: Childhood's End

Eventually, Ananke replaced Nephis at the steering oar. Neph looked drained after commanding the winds for an entire day… nevertheless, Sunny felt that her eyes were duller than mere exhaustion could explain.

Throwing a questioning glance at her, he asked:

"Are you alright?"

She lingered for a few moments, then nodded silently. Sitting down and leaning her back against the side of the ketch, Nephis then tiredly closed her eyes. She had not slept since they left Weave, and although Masters like them could easily remain awake for days, mental fatigue still had a way of catching up to them.

'...I guess she doesn't want to talk about whatever it is that's troubling her.'

Sunny studied Neph's pale face, then quietly summoned Nightmare and ordered him to guard her dreams. The tenebrous steed hid in the shadows at the bow of the boat, formless and watchful. Not satisfied with that, Sunny sent all but one of his shadows to augment him.

Memories of meeting the manifestation of the Prince of Madness still haunted his thoughts.

Later, there was nothing for him to do but continue weaving threads of essence. Sunny sat on the deck of the ketch with his legs crossed, his fingers dancing in the air. By now, he was proficient enough in creating essence strings to not pay a lot of attention to the process. It was a far cry from when he had attempted weaving for the first time and constantly cut his hands to the bone.

His painfully gained experience and the increased sensitivity that

Bone Weave granted to his fingertips made it easier. Now, Sunny just needed time and essence to create as long a thread as he needed to weave a Memory.

It still took some time.

After a while, Ananke looked at him with curiosity and asked:

"My Lord… if you don't mind me asking, what are you doing?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then turned his head slightly. He hesitated before answering, knowing how weird she was about all things involving the Demon of Fate. Nevertheless, eventually, he said:

"I am creating essence strings… weaving."

Her azure eyes widened slightly.

"You… you are a weaver, my Lord?"

'A weaver…'

Sunny tilted his head.

"If you mean someone who uses Weaver's sorcery, then yes. Although I am not very proficient with it."

The young priestess was staring at him with reverence. He sighed.

"Why, were these… weavers very rare in your time?"

She nodded slowly.

"Extremely so, my Lord. The sorcery created by the Demon of Fate was not something mortals could easily learn… or gods, even. There were only a few who mastered it. One of the two High Priests of the Nightmare Spell was one such sorcerer — my mother told me that he was a shaper of souls and a master of all kinds of magic. Are there a lot of weavers like you in the future?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"No. There are a few whose Aspects allow them to create Memories, but as far as I know, I am the only one who truly knows how to weave sorcery, unbound by the limits of my Abilities."

He sighed.

"I never had a teacher, though. Everything I know, I've learned myself. That is why I can only create copies of the weaves created by the Spell, or modify them at best."

The young priestess looked at him silently for a while, then smiled.

"But, my Lord… wouldn't that mean that the Nightmare Spell is your teacher? How can there be a better teacher than that?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. Suddenly grim, Sunny looked away.

"...I guess. The Spell has taught me a great deal of things, indeed."

Ananke's smile widened.

"You are beloved by fate, then. I feel at ease."

He hid his face, not wanting her to see the dark resentment drowning his eyes.

'Beloved by fate, huh?'

Sunny was indeed Fated. However, that did not mean that fate was especially kind to him… it just meant that he was wrapped in its strings like a helpless puppet, doomed to always be at its mercy.

In a sense, it meant that he would never know peace.

Not until he learned how to rip those strings apart.

'It's much more like I am cursed by it…'

But then again, wasn't his fate to become Defiled, tear his face with his nails, and turn into a mad abomination? Wasn't that his future?

Sunny shuddered, remembering that frightening possibility.

'No, no way. I would rather die. I will die, if this is the only outcome. That stupid theory of mine has to be wrong. The Mad Prince... I will never become him.'

Closing his eyes for a moment, he calmed his wildly beating heart and concentrated on weaving essence strings once again.

However, his fingers trembled as he did.

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By the time the seven suns touched the surface of the flowing water, the swift ketch reached the second of the Seven Houses. Mooring the boat to its pier, they camped for the night on the forlorn island.

It looked like a place where life had thrived once, but now, that vitality was gone. The children were gone, the parents were gone… and soon enough, the Seven Houses would be gone, too, swallowed by the eternal currents of the Great River.

In the morning, Sunny was awoken by the creaking of the windcatchers. After giving Ananke some time to take a walk along the shore and remember the days of her childhood, they left the artificial islands and sailed downstream once again.

It took them another day to pass the third House. By then, Ananke's appearance had changed once again.

She used to look only slightly older than Sunny and Nephis in Weave, but now, it was as if she was of the same age as them, or even younger.

By the time the swift ketch reached the fourth House, she seemed to be in her late teens.

The mood inside the ketch had turned dark. Looking at the endearing adolescent face of the young priestess, it was impossible to deny that they would have to leave her behind… soon.

The House of Parting was not that far away anymore.

Before they reached it, though, they had to pass by the last three of

the Seven Houses.

…However, by the time they were supposed to come in view of the fifth, Ananke's expression had turned tense.

Because the artificial island was nowhere to be found.

Chapter-1321: Drowning Island

Sunny and Nephis had learned a few things about navigating the endlessly flowing waters of the Great River, but they were still unsure what distance separated each of the Seven Houses from each other. Nevertheless, they quickly understood that something was wrong by looking at Ananke's face.

The young priestess was almost always either calm or smiling. At some point, however, a deep frown twisted her soft adolescent face, and a dark shadow was cast onto her vibrant azure eyes.

Sunny was the first to notice. He studied the teenage girl in front of them, then asked:

"What's wrong?"

Ananke lingered for a few moments.

"We should have reached the Third House by now, my Lord."

There were seven artificial islands where the children of Weave spent their childhood, and although the swift ketch was supposed to reach the fifth one, they were actually numbered in reverse order — starting with the House of Birth far downstream and ending with the House of Youth.

So, the Third House would have been the fifth they saw. However…

It seemed to have disappeared.

The young priestess studied the vast expanse of the Great River, then mumbled with uncertainty:

"I guess… the mechanisms of the island could have broken down, sending it adrift. I haven't visited here in a long while. Still, the

deterioration shouldn't have reached that stage already…"

Sunny and Nephis exchanged glances. Rising to her feet, Nephis looked north.

"Could it have been destroyed by an abomination?"

Ananke did not answer for a while. Eventually, she sighed.

"It's unlikely, but not impossible. Maybe that is what happened, indeed."

The ketch continued to fly downstream, but the mood of its three passengers had changed. Not only was there a threat of a powerful Nightmare Creature stalking the waters somewhere nearby, but the disappearance of one of the islands also meant that the rest of them could be gone, as well.

'Damnation…'

Sunny did not particularly care about the remaining two of the Seven Houses, but he was concerned about the lower House of Parting — the point where Ananke was supposed to say farewell to them.

The young priestess was intending to gift them her ketch, so she needed another vessel in order to return to Weave. There were supposed to be other boats moored at the House of Parting, but if the island had been destroyed… they were going to have a problem.

'It's not too bad…'

The furthest island-ship of Weave might not have been destroyed. Even if it was… Sunny could assume the form of the river serpent again, continuing to travel downstream without the ketch. With the Crown of Twilight, he would be able to sustain that form for longer.

But not long enough to reach Fallen Grace. There were less powerful abominations in the past, though… perhaps he and Nephis would be able to come up with a method to stay safe while he replenished his essence.

There was nothing to do for now. First, they needed to reach the

House of Parting and see whether it was still in one piece or not.

They continued sailing downstream in grim silence. The seven suns had already plunged into the Great River, suffusing it with a soft glow, when Sunny suddenly stirred and peered into the distance.

A few moments later, he pointed forward and said, his voice somber:

"I see something. There."

Ananke silently moved the steering oar, guiding the ketch in that direction.

A dozen minutes later, a dark shape became visible in the iridescent glow of the flowing water. It was massive and strangely shaped, rising above the surface of the river like a mountain.

Without having to say anything, Nephis and Sunny summoned their weapons. Ananke called upon her harpoon, as well.

However, they weren't in danger.

As the ketch drew closer to the ominous shape, they saw it for what it was.

A shattered platform built upon the frame of some leviathan's bones was sticking out of the water, tilted and half-drowned. They first saw one of its sides, overgrown by seaweed and barnacles. It took Sunny some time to realize that he was looking at the bottom of an island-ship.

Soon, enormous water wheels came into sight, motionless and broken, hanging high in the air. Finally, they went around the edge of the drowning island and saw the side of it that was supposed to be the surface.

The bright buildings, those of them that remained above the water, had mostly collapsed into piles of rubble. The gardens had been destroyed, and the tidy streets had turned into a labyrinth of ruins. The tall windcatchers had been shattered, their blades sticking out of the river like torn sails.

It was what remained of the Third House.

Looking at the scene of violent devastation, Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"...What could have destroyed it so thoroughly?"

It seemed as though a frenzied titan had been let loose on the floating island.

Nephis gripped the hilt of her sword tighter. Her face was motionless,but white sparks were dancing in her eyes.

"An abomination?"

Ananke remained silent, studying the ruins with a dark expression. Eventually, she shook her head.

"I don't know, my Lady. Let's leave this place as soon as possible."

Despite her true age and her youthful appearance, the priestess was not a very good liar. Sunny could tell that she was keeping some suspicion to herself… but since Ananke did not want to speak of it, he decided not to press the issue, for now.

He trusted her that much, at least.

The young priestess let Nephis take the steering oar and went to the bow of the ketch, still holding her harpoon. The ketch sailed past the ruins of the devastated House, giving them an opportunity to study how utter its destruction had been. None of them said anything, but all three looked somber and uneasy.

Finally, they left the drowning island behind and continued moving with the current of the Great River. An hour passed in tense silence, then another. Despite Sunny's fears, no monstrous dweller of the depths attacked the small ketch.

After a while, the first of the seven suns appeared from beneath the waters. The impenetrable darkness released its hold upon the sky, and a new day came, as bright and beautiful as all the rest of them.

However, there was something different about this one.

When all seven suns had risen from the water, Sunny noticed that far ahead of them, in the distance, the darkness still remained. It veiled the northern horizon like a wall, connecting the surface of the Great River to the sky.

Ananke was staring at the distant wall of darkness, too, her youthful face pale.

He scowled.

"What is it? Some ancient abomination manifesting its power? A Defiled?"

The young priestess pursed her lips, then slowly shook her head.

"No, my Lord. It's much worse. It is... a storm."

Her melodious voice sounded solemn.

"A time storm..."

Chapter-1322: Broken Time

The ominous words hung in the air, as foreboding as the wall of darkness veiling the sky far in the distance. Sunny and Nephis looked at Ananke, wary because of her somber expression.

This was the first time either of them had seen the young priestess show signs of despondence. The three of them must have made for a funny sight… two battle-hardened warriors staring at a teenage girl, waiting for her guidance.

Sunny frowned.

"A time storm?"

Ananke nodded slowly.

"...Yes, my Lord. I have told you before that time can be unpredictable on the Great River. There are places where it turns stale and unmoving, great whirlpools that nothing can ever escape, clashing currents, and deadly tides of all kinds. A time storm… is one of the most dangerous anomalies one can encounter."

Her youthful face darkened.

"It is a wandering disaster that twists and rips time apart, containing within itself absolute chaos. These storms originate from the span of the Great River that corresponds to the final days of the Doom War, when the last cataclysmic battles between the daemons and the gods were fought, and when both sides perished. They… usually don't reach that far upstream. I am sorry."

Nephis shook her head.

"You don't need to be sorry, Ananke. It is not your fault. However… how do we escape it?"

The young priestess lingered for a few moments, then said quietly:

"I am not sure that we can."

She uttered several words, easily overpowering Neph's Shaping. The wind that had been filling the sails of the ketch disappeared, and a moment later, a powerful gale crushed into the wooden boat, making it creak.

This one was not summoned by anyone. Much worse… it was blowing from downstream, pushing their hair back.

Which meant that the dark wall devouring the horizon was traveling in their direction. At least a normal storm would…

Judging by Ananke's expression, a time storm behaved the same.

Sunny uttered a silent curse.

"Can we outrun it?"

The young priestess swiftly moved to the side of the ketch and looked down, at the clear water flowing past the polished wood. A few moments later, she gritted her teeth.

"I don't think so, my Lord. We are already caught in its outer reaches."

It was only then that Sunny noticed that the current of the Great River seemed to have grown much stronger. It was hard to tell when the ketch was flying forward at full speed, but now that it slowed down and was about to come to a halt, the changes were apparent even for an Outsider like himself.

The wind was chasing the storm in their direction, while the current was pulling them into the storm. It was like a trap.

'Damn it…'

"What do we do, then?"

Ananke stared at the approaching wall of the storm with a dark

expression. A few moments later, she took a deep breath and forced out a smile.

"We will just have to brave it then, my Lord and Lady."

Sunny and Nephis stared at the teenage girl with stumped expressions. Hadn't she said that a time storm was a roving mass of chaotic time, wild and distorted enough to be absolutely deadly? The Third House had been much larger and infinitely more robust than their small ketch, but it was utterly destroyed.

How the hell were they supposed to survive something like that?

The young priestess shook her head.

"It is… it is not as bad as it sounds. I am a Transcendent, after all. We, the followers of Weaver, had to pass through the tumultuous region from where these storms originate on our way upstream, so we know a thing or two about how to endure them."

Her voice sounded confident, but the look in her eyes was anything but. Noticing their doubt, Ananke sighed.

"I am… reasonably certain that I can keep this small ketch from being torn apart. It is lucky, actually, that our vessel is not too large. However…"

She stared at the wall of darkness — that had already drawn closer in the few minutes they were talking — and grew solemn.

"It is very important that none of us touches the water, or becomes separated from the ketch. This storm front we see is only the aftereffect of the true disaster. The real horror lies beneath the waves, in the depths of water — no one can survive being pulled down by the raging currents of broken time. If you fall into the river, you will never come back."

Sunny grimaced. His hope of being able to salvage the situation by turning into the river serpent had just been crushed. Now, his only choice was to trust Ananke to see them through the disaster.

It was not that he didn't trust her... but...

Sunny suddenly remembered traversing the dark sea of the Forgotten Shore on the shoulder of the walking colossus. There had been a storm then, too… and a harrowing creature hiding within the storm.

His expression crumbled.

"...There are no ancient abominations hiding in that wall of darkness, are there?"

Ananke looked at him with surprise, then shook her head with a smile.

"No, my Lord. Even the Defiled can't survive the broken time. They avoid these storms just as we do."

Sunny sighed and looked downstream with a bleak face. After a while, he asked in a dull voice:

"We should prepare for a rocky ride, then?"

The young priestess nodded.

"Indeed. My Lord is wise…"

He was not even in the mood to celebrate getting another praise. Shaking his head, Sunny started stretching his body, then froze, realizing how senseless his actions were.

They were not preparing for a battle. Sharp swords and sturdy armor were not going to help them survive the storm, and neither would their combat skills.

Sighing again, he asked:

"What exactly do we need to do?"

With no time to waste, Ananke directed them on how to help her prepare the ketch for braving the storm. She tried to sound calm, but hints of urgency found their way into her voice.

The preparations did not take long. They lowered the sails, then folded them neatly. As it turned out, both masts of the ketch could be

taken down, as well. After dismantling them, everything was either stored under the deck of the wooden boat or fastened tightly in place.

Ten minutes later, nothing that could be easily torn or broken by the wind remained. The ketch turned from a sailboat into a simple and barren vessel, seemingly too small to survive a terrible storm, but also solid enough to look like it, maybe, could.

The three of them stood on the empty deck, looking north.

The wall of darkness was approaching.

Chapter-1323: Time Storm

As the winds turned violent and the surface of the Great River grew restless, Ananke gave them a few simple instructions. There was not much to say, really — she would be responsible for steering the ketch, protecting it against the ravages of distorted time, and preventing it from turning over. While they had to scoop up the water that would inevitably get inside and throw it back overboard.

The three of them also used sturdy ropes to tie themselves to the ketch. If the boat did overturn… hopefully, they would not be pulled into the depths of the underwater storm immediately.

Sunny was not sure what would happen if Ananke failed to keep their boat above the waves, though, so he didn't feel too hopeful.

"Prepare yourselves."

The voice of the young priestess was grave, which created a strange dissonance with her adolescent appearance.

"Once we enter the storm, we won't be free of it for several days. It will be hard to endure the strain, even for Ascended like you, my Lord and Lady. Conserve your stamina. And essence, too."

She lingered for a few moments, and then added quietly:

"All kinds of things can happen… but fate will guide us. Have faith!"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

If there was one thing he did not have, and never wished to possess, it was faith. The only thing he believed in was the strength of his arms and the resilience of his spirit. But Ananke was different. If faith in Weaver could help her cope with the cruel truth of the world… then he didn't have the heart to diminish it with his words.

So, he remained silent.

'Let's survive this.'

Looking at the wooden dipper he had been given, Sunny sighed.

Who knew that he would miss traveling inside the giant alloy coffins of the House of Night one day?

The wall of darkness, meanwhile, was approaching.

The winds were growing more and more violent, their howls drowning out all other sounds. The current of the Great River had turned fast and erratic, carrying the ketch forward with frightening speed. Tall waves rose and fell, and the wooden boat rose and fell with them, strong impacts reverberating through his bones.

'Several days of this, huh?'

Sunny finally understood why Ananke had said that enduring the storm would not be easy even for the inhumanly strong and resilient Ascended like them.

Plus… it was not a mundane storm, either.

Eventually, the ketch plunged into a thick mist. A few moments before it did, the light of the seven suns suddenly grew strange and distorted, as if someone had covered the sky with a muddy prism.

Sunny's hair stood on end. He experienced a very eerie and uncomfortable sensation… a sensation of the laws of the world coming undone around him, maybe. Time, which had always been a constant, did not feel solid and reliable anymore.

Instead, it was wild and chaotic, playing strange games with his perception. Even the shadows surrounding him were fragmented and twisted, stretched endlessly or moving in an impossible manner.

It was rather… maddening. He felt nauseated.

And apart from this bizarre sense of wrongness, the ketch was being thrown around like a toy by the waves. His body was being jerked

from side to side, up and down, experiencing moments of weightlessness and rough impacts. The winds were battering him, throwing streams of water at his face.

The roaring of the storm was deafening.

Blinded by the furiously swirling mist and the drops of water flying into his eyes, Sunny instantly felt miserable.

And afraid.

People had always been frightened in the face of raging nature. But here, it was not even nature — instead, the storm surrounding them was entirely unnatural.

It was just as harrowing, still.

…And it was only growing stronger. They were only at the outer boundary of the unnatural disaster.

As Sunny wondered how they were going to survive several days of this torture — if the ketch wasn't destroyed sooner, at that — he heard Ananke through the cacophony of the raging storm. The Names she had spoken were unfamiliar, and judging by the strain in her voice, they were not something the young priestess could easily use, or invoked often.

Nevertheless, after she spoke these Words, the nauseating distortion of the time storm seemed to have subsided a little. The ketch was still climbing the tall waves and plummeting from them, and the winds were still as violent as they had been a moment before… but the physical hardship of enduring their ruthless assault was at least tolerable.

It was as though an invisible bubble of more stable time appeared around the small ketch, keeping the worst of the chaos away.

Sunny turned his head to look at the young priestess.

Ananke was holding the steering oar with both hands, looking into the mist with a focused expression. Her youthful face was pale, but her azure eyes were full of stalwart determination. She controlled the

ketch with a skill born from hundreds of years of living on the Great River, somehow guiding it through the towering waves and chaotic currents.

Then, he glanced at Nephis.

Her eyes were burning with white flame, the light fabric of her tunic fluttering in the wind.

Finally, Sunny looked down and let out a heavy breath.

Bending down, he scooped up the first portion of water and tossed it into the mist.

His hand trembled for a moment.

Were they really going to live through this?

Sunny had lived through a great deal of things, many of which no one had any business surviving. He had often imagined his death, as well.

In his imagination, that death always came at the hand of a powerful Nightmare Creature… or a similarly powerful human. Sometimes, he imagined dying of old age in a comfortable bed, too.

One thing Sunny very rarely imagined, if ever, was being killed by a dumb, mindless force of nature. Perhaps it was vain, considering the kinds of environments he often ended up in… but still, he was unwilling to succumb to something so senseless.

'I survived a fight with a Great Beast, damn it…'

Was he going to die because of a weird storm?

'Like hell I will.'

Not to mention that there were the lives of Nephis and Ananke to consider, too.

…Encouraging himself like this, Sunny endured another wave and scooped more water from the wet deck.

The mist swirled and boiled around them, and the small ketch was being pulled deeper and deeper into the storm.

Chapter-1324: Relentless Battle

The time storm raged all around them. The current of the Great River, which had always been calm and constant, turned into a furious tide… being carried and tossed around by it, the ketch flew forward with terrible speed.

Tall waves rose and fell, and hurricane winds howled like frenzied beasts. Everything around them was drowning in a boiling fog. Blinded by it, deafened by the roaring thunderclaps, the three of them had lost all sense of time and direction.

There was only the feeling of the wet deck beneath their feet, the soaring and plummeting of the wooden boat, and the physical strain of enduring the cataclysmic fury of the storm. Faced with its inconceivable wrath, Sunny couldn't help but feel how tiny and insignificant he was in the face of the unnatural disaster.

…And that was with Ananke holding the worst of it at bay, as well.

The eerie, deeply distressing feeling of the immutable laws of the world turning vague and volatile was still there, muted but indescribably oppressive. He felt sickened, both physically and mentally. It was as if the solid foundation of his very being had suddenly been replaced by shifting quicksand, leaving him shaking and unstable.

Perhaps that was what madness felt like.

'Damnation…'

Steeling his heart, Sunny tried to ignore the appalling sensation and concentrated on his task — scooping up the water that had been thrown into the ketch by the storm and tossing it overboard. There was a lot of it, but he and Nephis could still keep up. It was just that… this simple task had turned out to be much more demanding

than he expected.

Simply existing in the wildly rocking boat was already an exercise in endurance. Considering the dire speed of the current and the height of the waves, it felt as though some demented giant was playing catch with their bodies, throwing them high up and then slamming them down with ferocious power.

Keeping his balance was not only tiring, but also difficult — every muscle in his body was under strain, seemingly at all times. The movements of the jerking ketch were chaotic and impossible to predict.

However, failing to follow them was tantamount to death. If Sunny was not careful and failed to continuously adjust to the constant changes, he would be thrown down on the deck, or worse yet, tossed overboard into the seething water.

And he had to do more than simply exist… he had to move, scoop up water, and throw it back into the raging river.

…Of course, there were more efficient ways of accomplishing that task. He could do more, and do it better, with the help of Shadow Manifestation. But their struggle against the storm was going to be an arduous marathon, not a sprint.

Currently, he felt only slightly tired. That tiredness was going to turn into a crippling exhaustion sooner rather than later — then, he was going to have to burn through his essence to keep his battered body moving, hoping against all hope that his reserves were deep enough. Wasting it on frivolous things would have been a shortsighted decision.

'I was wrong…'

Before they plunged into the storm, Sunny had noted that it was not a battle. But it was. It was just as physically straining, just as violent, and just as deadly.

The difference was that he couldn't remember a battle that had lasted for many days without ever allowing the fighters to rest and breathe

for even a minute. How dreadful would that be?

At least the enemy was a mindless force of nature.

An enemy like that did not require him to think too much, thus draining his mental powers. While arduous and exhausting, his task was not too far from being mechanical. Sunny still had to remain focused and actively pay attention to the motions of the ketch, but he didn't have to think, analyze the situation, and come up with lethal schemes.

Same went for Nephis. Ananke, however…

Her task was much more difficult than theirs. Not only did the priestess have to maintain the mystical protections around the ketch, she was also responsible for steering it.

The small boat would have already overturned a dozen times if not for the swift and precise judgment of their guide.

Sunny looked back, at the small figure of the young girl who was holding the steering oar firmly, peering into the mist. Her face was pale, but her eyes were brimming with focused resolve.

…He was worried about her.

He was worried about a great deal of things.

For example, about the fact that they were barely a few hours into the storm, with multiple days of this hell still remaining before the ketch escaped it. If nothing unexpected happened.

'One step at a time…'

One step at a time, one wave at a time, one thunderclap at a time. That was how they were going to survive the time storm. That was how Sunny and Nephis were going to survive the Third Nightmare, as well.

And after that…

Sunny did not have even the slightest idea what was going to happen

after… if… he became a Saint. Not only to him, but also to humanity itself. The Great Clans were going to continue their war. The waking world would continue to crumble. The Nightmare Spell would continue to pull them all deeper and deeper into the mysterious machinations of the Demon of Fate.

'Let's survive the damned storm first!'

Cursing under his breath, he bent his knees to lessen the impact of the wooden deck hitting his feet, endured the ketch plummeting from the crest of a tall wave to crash violently into the water, then hurriedly threw several scoops of foaming water over the side of the boat.

A few steps away, Nephis was doing the same.

The world seemed to be coming undone all around them.

Separated from the abyss of broken time only by the thin deck of a wooden boat, they sailed through the raging mist.

Chapter-1325: Lawless Abyss

Sunny had long lost the track of time… if it even existed in this furious abyss. The howling of the wind and the roar of harrowing thunderclaps had fused into a deafening cacophony, making his ears ring. His sight had been robbed by the boiling mist and the torrents of water. His lungs were on fire, and his muscles felt like they were on the verge of tearing.

It was not easy to bring an Ascended to such a sorry state through sheer physical hardship. But here he was, feeling like dying. With each passing hour… or minute, maybe… Sunny was using more and more essence to supplement his failing strength.

The ketch was still being carried by the tumultuous current, dancing between towering waves. The world was veiled by mist and darkness. He was still scooping up water, which was now sloshing around his ankles. The wooden dipper Ananke had given him had broken sometime ago, replaced by an iron bowl.

'How… much… longer?'

Sunny was not sure what he was trying to ask himself. How much longer before they escaped the storm, or before they drowned? In any case, he longed to drop on something solid… unmoving… and rest. Even if that rest would last forever.

The deck suddenly lurched upward, and he toppled, hitting it with his head. For a moment, Sunny saw stars. But even the stars were dancing wildly, tossed around by the cursed storm.

There was no answer. He had attempted to measure time by how fast his essence replenished, hoping that the Crown of Twilight would tell him when dawn and dusk came. But even the Great Memory succumbed to the vagaries of broken time. It activated and fell silent with no rhyme or reason, acting as bizarrely and chaotically as the

deadly storm around them.

All that Sunny knew was that it had to be a day… two days, maybe?... since they had entered the wall of darkness, at least. Even though it felt like an eternity.

The only measure of the passage of time that Sunny and Nephis had was Ananke. Although… that, in and of itself, was one of the most frightening things.

The young priestess was still steering the ketch, now slumped and barely holding on to the oar. However, her appearance had changed. If before she looked like an adolescent girl in her late teens, now, she seemed more like a child, no more than twelve years old.

Ananke had always been a person of small stature, but at the moment, her body shrank even more. The dark mantle she wore looked almost comically large for her delicate frame, which seemed to drown in its folds.

Nevertheless, she never wavered in her duty, keeping their small boat afloat despite the harrowing fury of the Great River.

…Even knowing that the priestess was a couple of hundred years old, Sunny couldn't help but feel his heart tighten when he saw a child struggling against the same hell he and Nephis were being tortured by.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

Picking himself up from the deck, Sunny gritted his teeth and continued to scoop the water up. The slower he was, the heavier the ketch would become… and the heavier it became, the more peril they would be in.

It was already a miracle that the old boat continued to withstand the ruthless cruelty of the storm.

It couldn't continue for much longer.

Not only because the wooden hull of the ketch could split apart at any moment, but also because the chaotic nature of the time storm

was growing more and more eerie and violent around them.

Despite the bubble of stability created around the boat by Ananke, they could feel it. Sunny thought he saw strange shapes in the mist. At other times, he felt his own body and mind changing for a split second before reverting to their previous state.

The same was happening to Nephis. He wasn't sure if he was seeing things, but her figure and face seemed to be changing from time to time. Her silver hair always seemed to be of different lengths. Her beautiful face appeared as usual one moment…

Then, it would turn into the pale face of a drowned corpse for a fraction of a second, or become burned and charred beyond recognition.

As soon as he blinked, the changes would disappear, and Neph would turn into her usual self.

Shuddering, Sunny thought about what she saw when she looked at him.

Did she see his face become covered by countless scars, turning into a demented mask of mutilated flesh? His eyes changing to contain boundless madness?

But even that was not the scariest part of the time storm.

The scariest part… was that Sunny could hear the vague echoes whispered by a familiar voice, as if the Spell was talking to him.

Even they sounded senseless and twisted, broken beyond recognition, as though even the Nightmare Spell was not above being affected by the harrowing calamity.

He had seen it rendered powerless only once before… in the Red Colosseum, which had been created by Hope. According to Ananke, the time storms were echoes of the final battle between the daemons and the gods. Was it such a surprise, then, that the authority of the Nightmare Spell was disrupted by them?

After all, he had already known that its power was not absolute.

Pushing his exhausted body and struggling to withstand the relentless assault of the dreadful disaster, Sunny withstood a powerful blow of the hurricane wind and tossed another portion of water overboard.

'Absolute…'

A sudden thought occurred to him in the midst of the infernal tempest. He froze for a moment, desperately trying to catch his breath.

'...Was the Nightmare Spell Weaver's attempt at creating an absolute law of their own?'

He was so stunned by that idea that it even seemed like the storm disappeared for a moment. It was as though the howling of the wind subsided, and a deafening silence surrounded him.

No…

'What?'

It really did disappear.

Bright light suddenly pierced Sunny's eyes, and he hissed, covering them with a hand.

The violent rocking of the deck subsided, as well.

'Did… did we escape?!'

Sunny lowered his hand and looked at the horizon.

Then, he tiredly fell onto the deck.

In front of them was a vast expanse of perfectly still water. It was not just peaceful… it was actually unmoving.

For the first time since they had entered the Third Nightmare, the Great River stood still.

Bright sunlight was pouring from the clear azure sky, illuminating the dreamlike vista. Behind them, the time storm rose like a dark wall. In

front of them, far away… was the same veil of darkness. It surrounded the vast circle of calm water like an ominous barrier, seething with rage.

The circle of calm water itself, meanwhile, was like a flawlessly flat mirror. It shone with reflected sunlight, making it seem as though they were drifting on the surface of a radiant star.

Sunny closed his eyes, then covered his face with both hands.

'No. No, we didn't escape anything.'

Instead, they only reached the eye of the storm.

Chapter-1326: Eye of the Storm

Drifting across the perfectly still surface of the water, the battered ketch slowly gained distance from the swirling wall of the dark mist. The raging winds died down, then disappeared altogether. A strange silence settled upon the world, as if they were caught in a gap between two moments.

Only the subtle ripples that spread through the radiant mirror of the frozen river's surface by the bow of the ketch showed that this hidden sanctuary was not entirely, and eternally, unchanging.

Sunny fell back and leaned tiredly on the side of the wooden boat. Breathing heavily, he looked at Nephis, then at Ananke. The silence was too sweet to break it with the sound of human voices. He was too exhausted to speak, as well… for a while, all three of them remained motionless, trying to recover from the torturous fury of the howling storm.

'We'll have to dive back into that hell, eventually.'

The thought alone made Sunny shudder. Refusing to entertain it, he closed his eyes and slumped down, intending to rest for a few minutes.

Instead, he fell into the embrace of sleep almost immediately.

Perhaps because of Nightmare, or perhaps because even the Defiled Titans could not reach into the depths of the time storm, nothing visited him in his dreams.

…Sunny woke up with a start when a shadow fell on him. For a split second, he was afraid that they were back in the ruthless grinder of the time cataclysm, but it was only Nephis — she had walked to the bow of the ketch to look ahead, her face pale and her eyes sunken.

He stared at her for a few moments, then sighed and pulled himself upright.

"How long was I asleep?"

She lingered for a while.

"There's no way to tell."

Sunny frowned, confused by the odd answer. However, then he felt it himself… in the place where the deep discomfort of sensing the broken nature of time had been, there was now a strange emptiness. But it was not the familiar comfort of sensing the natural flow of time, either.

Instead, it was the absolute lack of it.

He frowned, realizing that he could not feel the passage of time at all. It was a truly bizarre sensation, one that could not be properly described with words. His heart was beating, and his chest rose and fell as he breathed — however, he did not know how long each heartbeat took, and how much time passed between each breath.

It could have been a moment, a minute, or a thousand years. It could have been an eternity.

Sunny grimaced.

'Damnation.'

What was happening now?

They were alive, strangely enough… at least it seemed that way. His body ached all over, still reeling from the terrible strain of surviving the storm. Such pain was something that only the living felt.

Sunny turned to Ananke, wanting to ask the priestess a few questions, but remained silent in the end. His expression darkened.

The priestess looked even younger than she had the last time he saw her. Now, she resembled a girl of ten years of age, at most. Her ebony hair was short and unruly, and her lovely face had become round and

immature, with clear blue eyes and cheeks that had yet to lose all of their baby plumpness.

Ananke was sitting on the helmsman's bench, her feet dangling above the deck. Noticing his gaze, she picked up the folds of her comically oversized mantle and jumped down.

"Greetings, my Lord."

Her pleasant voice had grown childish and awkward.

Sunny hesitated, staring at the young girl. She looked nothing short of adorable… however, he did not feel uplifted by the cute sight. Instead, his heart felt as heavy as a mountain.

If… when they broke free of the storm, would Ananke even be able to return to Weave on her own?

He glanced at Nephis, who stood with her back to them, then sighed.

'We'll think of something.'

Then, Sunny turned to the child priestess and asked:

"What is going on, exactly?"

She smiled sweetly, her azure eyes sparkling, two dimples appearing on her plump cheeks.

"We are in the eye of the storm, my Lord. Time is frozen still here. It is not dangerous… I think. It's just that…"

He was momentarily distracted from her words by a subtle movement in the water. The strange thing, though… was that he did not sense any shadows shifting.

Turning his head, Sunny glanced outside the ketch. The surface of the Great River was perfectly clear and flat, turning into a giant mirror. The azure sky reflected in it seamlessly, suffused with bright sunlight. It was as though the entire world was shining with a splendid radiance.

The sight of it was like a vision from a beautiful dream. However…

There was something beneath the radiance.

Sunny heard Ananke end the sentence as he peered through the light:

"...we shouldn't look at the water."

Her warning came a split second too late.

The scream died in his throat as he saw…

A pale figure moving across the surface of the water with calamitous killing intent, shrouded in countless layers of furious darkness. That rippling darkness was boundless and unfathomable, containing within itself an infinite number of choices. The features of the harrowing figure were vague and obscured, and all he could see…

Was a pair of terrible wings, their feathers black like those of a raven. They spread, vast enough to devour the sky, and drowned the world in howling mist.

…Staggering back, Sunny fell to his knees and vomited blood. Two streams of it burst from his nose, too. Blood Weave, which would usually prevent something like this, was reeling in stupor, and so was he. It was as though his mind had suffered a tremendous shock from witnessing the dark figure… and sensing the harrowing depth of its obliterating killing intent.

Hurting and disoriented, Sunny wiped the blood off his face and spat.

"What… what the hell is that?!"

Ananke remained silent for a while, uncharacteristically solemn.

Then, she said in a low voice:

"Those... are reflections of the gods, my Lord. And of the daemons that slayed them..."

Chapter-1327: Frozen Reflections

Sunny wiped the blood off his lips and remained motionless for a while, staring at the wooden deck. There was an irate expression on his face, and when he threw a furtive glance to the side, his body trembled slightly.

"That's… great."

'The reflections of the gods and daemons…'

It made sense, in the senseless kind of way that seemed to be prevalent here in the Tomb of Ariel. The time storms were echoes of the final battles between the daemons and the gods. They had been created when the aftershocks of those unimaginable clashes reached the Great River through the titanic walls of the black pyramid.

So… it wasn't that unusual that there were reflections of the awesome deities still remaining in the eye of the storm, where time was frozen still.

Whose figure had Sunny witnessed just now?

Nephis, it seemed, also wanted to know.

"What did you see?"

Her voice sounded nonchalant, but he could tell that she was curious.

Sunny groaned and sat down, then summoned the Endless Spring to take a sip of water. Washing the taste of blood off his tongue, he lingered for a moment and said in a somber tone:

"I think I just saw Nether in full war mode, going all out."

The harrowing figure which was shrouded in darkness… Sunny was not certain, but he felt that it was the Prince of the Underworld, Nether — the Demon of Destiny — himself.

After all, he was also the Demon of Choice. And that was what Sunny had sensed within the boundless expanse of rippling darkness, an infinite amount of choices. True darkness also originated from the mists of the Hollow Mountains, where Nether's domain lay.

'Curse it.'

Sunny had seen a daemon before. However, he had not been reduced to such a sorry state after meeting Hope face-to-face. Why was gazing upon the Prince of the Underworld so different?

'I guess it was not seeing him… it was feeling an echo of his killing intent.'

Nether's murderous will was so terrifying that simply looking at his reflection almost killed Sunny. And that was considering that he was an Ascended Tyrant, too… if a mundane person had glimpsed the visage of the infuriated daemon, they would have probably dropped dead at the spot, simple as that.

'Scary…'

Sunny turned to Nephis and smiled weakly.

"Neph… remind me to never get on the bad side of a deity."

She raised an eyebrow slightly, giving him a dubious look.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

Ignoring his request, Nephis shook her head and asked:

"So what did he look like? The Demon of Destiny?"

She had spent her Second Nightmare in the Underworld, so she must have been dying to know.

Sunny remained silent for a moment. Eventually, he shrugged.

"I have no idea. I only saw a pair of raven wings, and a figure moving within a shroud of terrifying darkness. That was pretty much it. Ah... but it was also enough to almost make me pass out, so..."

He looked at Ananke and asked:

"Are all gods and daemons reflected in these waters?"

The child priestess seemed unsure.

"I don't know, my Lord. Perhaps they are — all except Weaver, who did not participate in the Doom War. War God, Sun God, Beast God, Storm God, Heart God, and Shadow God… their reflections should be here. The same goes for the daemons — the Demon of Desire, the Demon of Dread, the Demon of Choice, the Demon of Imagination, and the Demon of Repose. Oh… and the sixth one.

Uh… I seemed to be forgetting her title…"

Ananke's childish voice grew quiet with embarrassment, and then ceased completely.

Sunny stared at her for a few moments.

'Right. The sixth one should be Oblivion. Oblivion is a she, huh?'

Then… he knew the titles of all seven daemons now, didn't he?

Weaver, the Demon of Fate… the oldest of the seven. Hope, the Demon of Desire — although she was also often called Desire, the Demon of Hope, which was not confusing at all. Then there was Ariel, the Demon of Dread, and the Demon of Oblivion, whose name had been forgotten by all. Nether, the Demon of Destiny — or Choice — was the youngest.

The last two he had never heard of before. The Demon of Imagination and the Demon of Repose…

'Weird!'

Their titles did not sound particularly… demonic at all. He had expected something disastrous and terrifying, like the Demon of Strife

or the Demon of Frenzy. The daemons had been feared above all other lesser deities, after all, and perhaps even more than the gods.

The word for imagination could also be translated as illusion, vision, or sight. The word for repose could also be translated as renewal, rejuvenation, and restoration.

What was so frightening about these things?

'Well… imagination can indeed be scary, I guess. I can also imagine how ceaseless renewal might end up becoming a nightmare, sort of.'

Nevertheless, the two daemons were a complete mystery to him.

…To be honest, all seven daemons were a mystery, as were all six gods.

'If only there was a place where I could learn a bit about each of them, including how they looked and fought. Right?'

Sunny glanced at the radiant water, suddenly consumed not only by dread, but also by burning curiosity.

It was all right here, one look away…

Shuddering, Sunny forced himself to turn away.

'What are you doing, fool?'

He was in the Tomb of Ariel, of all places. A titanic pyramid built to bury the truths that even one of these ineffable beings had not been able to bear, and where the knowledge of those truths gave birth to the Defilement.

If Sunny failed to understand that not all truths were meant to be learned in such a place, then he really did not deserve to be alive.

'Ah… what a disappointment.'

Why wasn't there a Demon of Curiosity? Curiosity was a much more terrifying thing than imagination and repose, as far as he was concerned.

Looking at the embarrassed Ananke, he sighed and shook his head.

"The sixth daemon is Oblivion. Don't worry… it's her nature to be easily forgotten. You already did well by remembering that there was one more of them, really."

The child priestess hesitated for a while, then nodded with a smile.

"Right! Thank you, my Lord."

Trying not to look too closely at the surface of the water, Sunny turned away and peered into the distance, where the dark wall of the time storm towered like a boundary of the world.

His expression dulled.

The moment of respite in the eye of the storm was welcome and unexpected… but it was also doomed to be brief.

Soon, they would have to challenge the fury of the unnatural cataclysm once again.

The thought made him shudder.

Chapter-1328: Serene Peril

It was peaceful in the eye of the storm, if a little bit eerie. The strange lack of the sensation of time had been uncomfortable at first, but Sunny quickly found himself forgetting that time had ever existed at all.

The view of the azure sky reflecting on the perfectly calm water was beautiful and tranquil. The silence was like a lullaby, making him feel at ease. Sunny had not felt such peace in a long, long while…

There was no need to hurry, and no possibility to do so anyway. Without telling how long their actions took, they could not know whether they were being slow or swift either. So, it was fine to just let go and remain still for a bit, enjoying the serene stillness of the world…

Which was why Sunny soon found himself feeling cold dread.

'N-not… this is not good…'

It was just too easy to be lulled into inaction in this strange and frozen place. At some point, Sunny realized that he did not know how long he had remained sitting with his back against the side of the ketch, without a thought in his head.

His eyes widened slightly.

If they weren't careful… would they end up frozen forever in the eye storm, too, just like everything else was frozen in this tranquil haven?

Shuddering, he turned to Ananke and asked:

"How long has it been since we reached this place?"

She helplessly shook her small head.

"I don't know, my Lord."

He hesitated.

"How long before we dive back into the storm, then?"

The child priestess peered into the distance. Her large blue eyes darkened somewhat. Nevertheless, she said resolutely:

"We'll leave as soon as possible. Time might be frozen here, but it still flows outside. It is better not to linger… otherwise, Fallen Grace might already be destroyed when we finally escape the disaster, and I would have failed in my task."

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

'Right… it is not too bad.'

They had not been caught in the trap of frozen time yet. Ananke was proof — she had grown a bit younger after they had entered the eye of the storm, meaning that the circle of tranquil water was moving in relation to the unceasing current of the Great River.

Since she had not turned even younger yet, they couldn't have been idling in the serene silence for too long. She was like their anchor in this beautiful and insidiously dreadful place.

'Thank the gods…'

Sunny suddenly wanted to laugh. He could have never imagined that he would be desperate to dive back into the nightmarish havoc of the deathly storm, but here it was, the desire to escape the tranquil circle of frozen time, fast.

The future was truly unknowable, and one could never say never.

Nephis stirred at the bow of the ketch and looked at them, her expression stiff.

"I've been keeping an eye on the wall of the storm. We have drawn closer to the outer boundary, somewhat… but without the current, the ketch is moving too slowly. In fact, it is not moving at all. We will

have to raise the sails and summon the wind."

It seemed that she had never lost track of their goal. Sunny sighed.

The nature of time might have changed, but Neph never did… at least the deepest reaches of her heart did not. She was still just like she had been all those years ago, beneath the branches of the Soul Devouring Tree. Back then, she had also spent all her time on the shore of the Ashen Barrow, looking west — even if she couldn't quite remember why.

Her single-minded determination was something to rely on, as well.

It was ironic, really… a girl whose fate it was to bring change was the most unchanging thing in Sunny's life.

As he was thinking that, Ananke's shoulders fell slightly.

"Yes, my Lady. Just give me a moment, and I…"

Nephis shook her head.

"No. I will summon the wind, and I will steer the ketch. I will guide us out of the storm when we enter it, as well."

The child priestess looked up at her with a startled expression.

"But, my Lady!"

Neph stared at her somberly for a few moments, her gaze heavy. Eventually, she said bluntly:

"You have grown too weak, Ananke. I am sorry. Your body is not strong enough to handle the strain. You can't even reach the deck with your feet while sitting on the helmsman's bench… how are you going to control the oar?"

She looked down, then sighed. Walking up to the child priestess, Nephis patted her on the shoulder and forced out a smile.

"Don't worry. Isn't that why you taught me? You taught me well. I will steer the ketch while you keep the broken time at bay. Each of

the three of us will make sure that we escape the storm alive."

With that, she threw a poignant look at Sunny. He felt sorry for Ananke, but knew that Nephis was right. Their guide… was not capable of guiding the boat through a raging storm anymore. Even if it hurt her pride and went against her determination, it was time for the two of them to protect Ananke instead of being protected by her.

They had to make sure that she survived the storm. And after that… they had to make sure that she had the means of returning to Weave, too.

'How did everything become so complicated…'

The damned storm had thoroughly destroyed their plans. Now, all they could do was finish their battle against it, and then come up with new ones.

The strain on Sunny was going to increase, considering that he would be draining the water from the ketch alone this time. But he would have to manage, somehow. If there was one consolation, it was that half of the journey was already behind them. Knowing that each minute brought them closer to safety, he wouldn't need to preserve his essence as much.

Sunny smiled, then clapped his hands.

"Alright! Let's get out of the eye of the storm first. Honestly, this beautiful place… is way too creepy. I'll feel better once we're drowning in raging water and being battered by devastating winds. Wouldn't you?"

Not to mention that he was still struggling against an overwhelming desire to peer into the reflections frozen in the still water, consequences be damned.

Ananke lowered her head, despondent, but there was nothing she could say. Her small frame was indeed not suitable for steering the ketch through the powerful storm anymore. Transcendent or not, she was still a child now.

Feeling a sense of urgency, the three of them struggled against the

lulling tranquility of the frozen time and hurried themselves, hoping to return to the crushing embrace of the storm as soon as possible.

Chapter-1329: Last Hurdle

As Nephis steered the ketch toward the wall of darkness, Sunny had some time to prepare himself mentally for the arduous struggle that lay ahead of them. He also had time to observe Ananke closer.

What he saw… did not bode well.

Despite being an adult — and someone hundreds of years old, at that — the priestess had regained the body of a young child. Looking at her youthful appearance, it was hard to remember how ancient, decrepit, and frail she had been once, when they met her in the far future.

But the change was not exactly a benevolent one. Despite being full of vitality, Ananke had obviously grown much weaker. Her immature body was not as strong and physically capable as it had been before… but, worse than that, the differences went deeper than that.

As Sunny observed the child priestess, he slowly realized that her mind had been affected by her turning into a child, as well. It was as though her head could not contain the mature consciousness of an experienced adult anymore. Nor could her heart handle the powerful emotions of one with the same composure.

Ananke had not really turned dull or less intelligent, but… there was a certain infantile straightforwardness to how she spoke and behaved now. Her eyes, which had always been wise, seemed slightly naive, as well.

Her mind was slowly regressing.

Sunny felt cold claws grip his heart.

'Curse it…'

He gritted his teeth and looked down, but then forced himself to straighten.

'Fine. It's fine. She has taken care of us enough… we'll take care of her, now.'

Of course, they still needed the child priestess to protect the ketch from the ravages of broken time. Sunny hoped that she would be able to maintain the bubble of stability around the ketch — both for their sake, and her own.

Once they were out of the storm, they would find a way to help her return to Weave, even if it meant turning around and sailing back upstream.

His heavy thoughts were interrupted by a sudden breeze that threw tiny droplets of water into his face. Sunny looked up, sensing the shadows around them shift.

'We're here…'

The wall of darkness was already drawing close.

"Hurry!"

Nephis dismissed the winds she had summoned and hurried to the middle of the ketch. Together, they swiftly lowered the sails and dismantled the masts, repeating the actions they had performed before entering the storm for the first time.

By the time they were done, the water around them was not still anymore. Although weak, there was a hint of a current, pulling them toward the seething wall of dark mist.

The light of the seven suns slowly dimmed, and the winds grew more violent. Sunny grimaced, sensing the bizarre transition from the absence of time to the unnerving mess of it being broken and volatile.

'Come on, Ananke…'

Despite his worries, the child priestess performed her task just as flawlessly as she had before. Submitting to her will, the feeling of

time having gone mad diminished, allowing him to breathe freely.

The nauseating feeling of fundamental wrongness in the world was still there, but bearable. Sunny quietly cursed.

'Argh. I have not missed that sensation…'

The current was growing faster and faster, the still surface of the water becoming restless. Finally, waves appeared, small and weak at first, then chaotic and powerful.

Standing at the stern of the ketch, Nephis steered it with an iron hand. Sparks of white flame danced in her eyes, refusing to be devoured by the encroaching darkness.

'Here we go…'

The darkness swallowed the world once again. The tranquil silence was torn apart, replaced by the furious howling of the wind. The deck of the ketch jerked, mounting a tall wave. A thunderous thunderclap shook the world.

'This is it. The last hurdle!'

Looking into the nightmarish abyss of the storm, Sunny found Ananke's shoulder and pulled her closer to him, so that she wouldn't be thrown overboard by the violent waves.

Looking down, he hesitated for a few moments, and then smiled.

"Don't worry. It will be fine… I once rode a Saint into the depths of the ocean to fight a Corrupted Terror, you know? That was way scarier than this."

Ananke stared at him with her large azure eyes, and then nodded.

"Yes, my Lord!"

Sunny grinned, then picked up the iron bowl and prepared to scoop up as much water as he could.

'Granted… I only survived fighting the Sybil of the Fallen Grace by

luck. And now I need to survive this storm, somehow, to meet her again. What a ridiculous turn of events, really…"

It was indeed a bit ridiculous.

However, Sunny did not feel like laughing.

The storm swallowed them like a giant beast. The ketch flew on the raging current, dwarfed by towering waves. The swirling mist enveloped the world, making it seem as though nothing except for the terrible disaster remained within the Tomb of Ariel.

The insidious tranquility of the eye of the storm seemed as though it had never existed. They had left its shelter, as well as the reflections of the gods and the daemons, behind.

Sunny would have felt regret at the missed opportunity to learn divine secrets, but he had no time to think about such things.

Bending down, he scooped up the first portion of water and tossed it back into the mist.

His body did not ache… for now.

His reserves of essence were not empty, for now.

His mind was not numbed by the sickening feeling of time breaking apart, for now.

All these torments would come soon.

And then, hopefully, he would leave them behind as well. To make space for some new horrors, without a doubt. But one day, at the end of it all…

A bright future awaited him. Maybe.

For now, however, what lay ahead was the past. Sunny had to travel far into the past, meet Dusk of the Fallen Grace, find the members of the cohort, and conquer this damned Nightmare.

Shielding his face from the devastating blow of the wind, he gritted

his teeth.

'Ah, really now…'

They were braving a storm of broken time in the company of a two-hundred-year-old child, who was a priestess of the Nightmare Spell.

Sunny chuckled.

'...No one is going to believe this crap!'

Chapter-1330: Floodgates

The time storm seemed even more violent the second time around. The deafening howling of the wind had grown deeper and louder, sounding more like a monstrous roar now. It was as if an enormous beast was struggling to break free of its chains somewhere below the waves, its voice reverberating across the entire world and shaking the heavens.

The sky itself seemed like it had been torn asunder and collapsed. A flood of boiling mist poured through its broken dam, devouring the seething surface of the Great River. The tiny speck of the wooden ketch flew through the howling abyss, surrounded by frenzied darkness.

Sometimes, a thunderous crack would drown out the fury of the storm, as if the pillars of the world were fracturing and crumbling apart.

Then, a blinding flash of lightning would momentarily illuminate the turbulent expanse of dark water. Hidden by the mist, colossal waves rose and fell like black mountains, carrying with them an obliterating weight.

And those were only the outward manifestations of the harrowing storm. Sunny did not know what kind of destructive forces were clashing in the depths of the river below the ketch, but he could feel the nature of time turning more and more twisted around them.

Even protected by Ananke, he could feel his body and mind twist and crack with it.

'Argh…'

He failed to contend with the furious power of the wild current and was sent tumbling, colliding with the side of the ketch. Blinded by

pain and ignoring it, Sunny reached out and caught the child priestess before she was washed overboard.

The ropes connecting them to the ketch became entangled, but it was the least of his problems right now.

The wooden boat was creaking and groaning around them, seemingly on the verge of breaking apart. Nephis had firmly planted herself at the stern, holding onto the steering oar with all her might. White flames were dancing in her eyes, and soft radiance rose from her skin, made vague and unclear by the veil of mist.

The ketch was falling from a towering wave, and Sunny felt weightless for a moment. His body was actually separated from the deck, drifting upward — he had to activate the Feather of Truth and make himself heavier in order to not be tossed into the air.

Placing himself between the wooden deck and Ananke, Sunny gritted his teeth. A moment later, the crushing impact of the fall came, knocking the wind out of him.

Hurt, suffocating, he whispered a quiet curse.

The ketch was filling up with water. How was he supposed to drain it if he couldn't even remain standing?

They had done well up until now… it was impossible to tell how long their dreadful journey through the storm had lasted, but judging by how tired and battered his body was, it couldn't have been a small amount of time. Despite that, there was no sign of the furious disaster growing any weaker.

In fact, it was only becoming more violent and dire. And now, his strength was failing him.

'I can't resist it with just my body anymore…'

Sunny knew that he had to conserve his essence as much as possible, yet the situation had become too desperate. Even if it was too soon, there was no other choice but to burn the bridges and open the floodgates, hoping that the storm would subside sooner than his reserves ran dry.

If not…

"It's going to be alright, Ananke… we'll just have to hold on for a little bit more…"

His whisper was too quiet for the child priestess to hear through the deafening roaring of the storm, but it made him feel stronger.

Pushing himself off the deck, Sunny threw a somber glance at Nephis.

Changing Star was standing at the stern of a ketch like a beautiful statue, surrounded by a white halo. Her slender figure, silhouetted by the fluttering fabric of the windswept tunic, was the only source of light in the ocean of seething darkness. Her face was pale and motionless, turned into a porcelain mask by the torment of her torturous Flaw.

Neph's eyes were grim and radiant, burning with furious resolve and cold determination.

She was struggling just as much as he was.

She was also just as stubborn and relentless as he was.

Together… they were going to overcome this terrible storm, despite it all.

Sunny pushed air into his burning lungs.

"And then for a little bit more… and a little bit more…"

Sparks of light ignited in the mist around him, coalescing into several Memories.

First, a serpentine crown of black metal appeared on his head. Then, a flute carved out of emerald bone appeared in his hand.

Sunny took a deep breath and activated the [Royal Promise] enchantment of the Crown of Twilight. Immediately, he felt a subtle connection form between him and the seething waters of the Great River. That connection was weak and insignificant… but it was strong enough for his goals.

Commanding the water like he did shadows, Sunny willed it to move.

The foaming water that filled the insides of the ketch, already reaching above his shins, suddenly stirred. Flowing in reverse, it tentatively crawled up the sides of the boat and spilled into the turbulent darkness beyond. One second passed, then another… a few heartbeats later, the remaining water was already not as deep as it had been before.

This method was certainly much more convenient than draining it one scoop of the iron bowl at a time. On the downside, he could feel his essence disappearing with a frightening speed, as well as a heavy strain pressing down on his already reeling mind.

'Heavy… it's heavy…'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny persisted. At the same time, he brought Bone Singer to his lips and blew into it. The next moment, a dome of blessed silence enveloped the ketch, sparing their ears from the staggering cacophony of the storm.

The sudden lack of deafening noise left him stunned.

Swaying, Sunny fell heavily to the deck and grabbed onto the side of the ketch, holding himself in place.

Outside, the havoc of the time cataclysm was the same. The small boat was still being tossed around by the raging current, flying up the towering waves and then plummeting down.

But inside, at least for a little while, there was silence and peace.

Taking a shaky breath, Sunny lowered his head and wondered how long he would be able to keep this peace in existence.

'Not long… it won't be long at all…'

Chapter-1331: The Well of Wishes

Nephis continued to struggle against the storm, guiding them through the towering waves, but Sunny and Ananke received a moment of respite.

If it could even be called that… they were still inside the ketch, which was tossed around like a toy boat by the raging current. Sunny was using one hand and all of his tyrannical strength to keep himself in place while holding Ananke with the other.

But without the need to feverishly scoop out water, they at least could catch their breaths and remain motionless for a while — for as long as his essence lasted, that was.

Sunny leaned against the wet wood tiredly, consumed by bitter exhaustion. His chest was rising heavily.

'Not good…'

Being a Supreme Memory, the Crown of Twilight was a very powerful tool. But correspondingly, it consumed a lot of essence. It was going to take a few minutes for his tentative authority over water to drain the entire boat… after that, it would be unwise to keep sustaining the effect of the [Royal Promise].

He sighed.

What was even a minute? In this godforsaken storm, it was impossible to tell.

The effects of time being broken were still ravaging them. Sunny had already grown accustomed to seeing ghastly hallucinations impose themselves on the bodies of Nephis, Ananke, and himself. There were

vague, harrowing shapes sometimes appearing from the mist, as well.

He could never discern their nature, but the glimpses of unknown figures and events filled him with a deep sense of terror.

Were they twisted fragments of the past? Of the future? Or something else entirely, that had crawled into the world through the rifts in the broken framework of the absolute law?

He did not know, and did not wish to know.

'Perhaps this is how Cassie feels…'

There were shadows, as well. They were just as twisted and perverse as the rest of things within the time storm. He had already limited the range of his shadow sense as much as it was possible, but he could still feel them… the chilling wrongness of them… and couldn't help but shudder.

Sunny felt grim and hopeless.

…At that moment, a childish voice distracted him from his dark thoughts.

"M—my Lord?"

He stirred and looked down, at the small figure of the child priestess.

Ananke had grown even younger. Now, she looked like a girl of maybe seven years of age, tired and afraid. Her mind must have regressed further, too. She was still maintaining the bubble of stability around the ketch, but... it felt weaker.

She looked more like an actual child than a wise Saint trapped in the body of one, as well.

Sunny forced out a weak smile and asked, trying to keep his tone soft:

"What is it?"

Ananke lingered for a while, seemingly embarrassed. Eventually,

though, she whispered in a small voice:

"I'm… scared."

Those words...

They cut Sunny like a knife. The proud priestess he knew would have never allowed herself to say something like that to a person she considered her ward. The fact that she had… meant that Ananke was gone further than he thought.

His heart grasped by the icy claws of anger and regret, Sunny struggled to keep his bitter emotions away from his face. His smile froze.

"There's… no need to be afraid, Ananke. We will escape this storm, the three of us. I am sure of it. See?"

He pointed to the water, which was flowing out of the ketch on its own.

What he had said to the child priestess was not a lie. Sunny desperately believed that they would, indeed, survive the time storm. Or rather… he had fooled himself into believing that.

He might not have been able to lie to others, but lying to himself? That was the easiest thing in the world.

Ananke grew quiet, seemingly calmed a little by his words. However, her small face was still sick with fear. After a few moments, she asked again, her voice tentative:

"My Lord?"

Sunny pulled her closer to him, struggling against the sudden movements of the ketch.

"Yes?"

She hesitated a little.

"Might you… tell me a fairy tale?"

He froze, startled by her request. It was natural for a distressed child to want to hear a fairy tale... probably.

'Right?'

The problem was, Sunny couldn't remember any. The only one that he could think of was the strange tale of the wooden boy that Nephis had told him about. But considering its macabre ending, he didn't think it was very suitable to tell that one to Ananke.

He shifted slightly, then said softly:

"I'm sorry… I don't think I really know any fairy tales."

The child priestess lowered her head.

"Oh…"

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"...How about you tell me one, instead?"

Ananke looked at him in surprise, her large azure eyes widening.

"Me?"

He nodded with an encouraging smile.

"Yes. Which one is your favorite?"

The child priestess stared at him, sparks slowly igniting in her eyes. She seemed to have forgotten about the terrifying fury of the storm, at least for a moment.

A tentative smile brightened her small face.

"Oh! It is… it is about the Well of Wishes."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, acting as if he was paying rapt attention to her words.

"The Well of Wishes, huh?"

Ananke nodded seriously.

"Yes. They say that the world was born from a wish. And so, a Well of Wishes is hidden at the estuary of the River… because it flows back in time, to the moment when the world was born. Anyone who reaches there will have their most dear wish come true."

Sunny tilted his head, surprised by the strange logic of the fairy tale — both by how odd it was, and that there strangely was logic to it at all.

'In the beginning, there was desire…'

Was it so wrong to say that the world was born from a wish?

As the water left the ketch and his essence burned, the child priestess continued with a smile:

"There was once a brave girl who was separated from her mother by the currents. The girl couldn't meet her mother, because she was Riverborn. But… she found a magic ship, which allowed her to sail the River just like an Outsider…"

As the storm raged around them, Ananke told him about the incredible adventures of the Riverborn girl in her small, childish voice. By the time the Riverborn girl found her Outsider mother, the mother had grown weak and frail from old age. Knowing that time would separate them again soon, forever, the girl sailed for the Estuary.

Ananke's voice had grown excited.

"...And finally, she found the Well of Wishes. The girl's wish was to be with her mom, and so, the Well made her mother Riverborn as well. She returned upstream on her magic ship, and they lived together happily, forever…"

She looked at him expectantly, all worry gone from her face.

Sunny held her close, feeling the violent forces of the storm trying to throw the battered ketch down.

"That… is a wonderful fairy tale, Ananke. I liked it a lot."

The child priestess smiled.

"You are an Outsider too, my Lord. You don't even need a magic ship to reach the Estuary! Maybe… maybe you can find the Well of Wishes, too…"

He didn't have the heart to tell her that what waited in the Estuary was the source of the Defilement, and not a magical well that granted everyone their dearest wishes.

Instead, Sunny lingered for a while.

Eventually, he nodded.

"Yes… wouldn't that be nice? Maybe I'll really find the Well of Wishes and have my greatest wish come true, one day. Who's to say I won't?"

He smiled.

The Well of Wishes…

Sunny tensed, feeling the approach of an impact.

It was a beautiful fairy tale, indeed.

Chapter-1332: Splinters

The ketch was thrown into the air by the powerful current, like it had been a thousand times already, and then plummeted down. Bruised and battered, Sunny gritted his teeth and prepared to endure the violent shock of the impact — just like he had endured a thousand of them already.

The seething water seemed as hard as stone when the bottom of the wooden boat hit it. He held on to the side of the ketch, feeling a grim sense of fatigue and hopelessness overwhelm his mind. The darkness was as oppressive as it had been before, the mist was as blinding as it had been before, and the fury of the storm was as chillingly dreadful as it had been before.

However, this impact was different from all the previous ones.

...Sunny failed to see the moment the wood split, but he heard it. Even through the howling of the hurricane wind and the roaring of the falling waves, the cracking sound seemed clear and deafening.

By the time he turned, Nephis was already falling. She hit the deck with a dull thump, leaving a streak of blood on it, and tumbled forward. A split second later, her back hit the protruding fittings of the dismantled mast, violently arresting her fall.

A stifled groan escaped from her lips.

'What… what happened?!'

It took Sunny a moment to notice a jagged piece of broken wood that she was gripping with both hands, still, her knuckles white. Then, he hurriedly glanced at the stern of the ketch.

His pupils narrowed.

The steering oar… was gone. There was only the piece Nephis was holding and a scattering of wet splinters on the deck. The rest of it had shattered, and was washed away by the raging current.

Sunny froze for a moment, both terrified and relieved — relieved because it was not the deck itself that had cracked, terrified because the ketch had become completely uncontrollable now.

The next wave was already approaching, and with no one to steer the boat to face it directly, it was going to hit them from the side. Which meant that the ketch would most likely roll.

Even if it didn't immediately, there would be the next wave, and the next, and the next… and a thousand more after that.

Without a helmsman leading the ketch through the storm, they were doomed.

'Curse it!'

There was no time to think, so he just acted on instinct.

Releasing the enchantments of the Crown of Twilight and the Bone Singer, Sunny called upon the shadows instead.

A tide of them poured out of the small stone lantern that hung on his belt, filling the ketch. There had already been shadows there, but all of them were twisted and broken, turned wrong and eerie by the ravages of broken time. Sunny wasn't sure that he could communicate with these shadows, and so, he summoned more reliable helpers from within the Shadow Lantern.

The cacophony of the storm returned with a deafening vengeance, hitting Sunny like a physical force.

The rolling wave reached their small boat and dove underneath it, sending the ketch rising into the dark vastness of the raging mist. The deck tilted dangerously underneath him, threatening to send Sunny and Ananke overboard.

Nephis slid in their direction before grabbing onto the fitting of the mast.

As they were being simultaneously thrown into the air and pulled into the water, the shadows surged forward. They flowed over the sides of the wooden boat, enveloping it like a black shroud.

Then, the shadows solidified, turning the ketch into an improvised ark. The opening above the deck was closed completely, cutting off the streaming water and the crushing blows of the wind.

All that remained inside were wisps of swirling mist and the darkness, pierced by the soft radiance emanating from Neph's skin.

…However, the ketch was still tilting as it climbed higher and higher. Soon, it was going to crest the wave and either overturn, or plummet back down into the raging waters.

Sunny let out a low growl, then pushed himself and Ananke off the side of the boat and scaled the tilting deck, grabbing the fittings of the mast next to Nephis. A moment later, shadows wrapped themselves around the three of them like bonds, pressing them into the wet wood.

The shadows were like a firm, but elastic harness that would prevent them from flying around the dark interior of the ketch when it inevitably rolled.

Which happened a few seconds later.

Sunny experienced a few moments of weightlessness, his body pressing against the harness, then the familiar trauma of the crash. The cold water — what little of it remained after he had drained it with the help of the Crown of Twilight — flowed across the closed interior of the shadow-veiled boat, pouring into his mouth and nose.

But at least the cocoon of shadows he had created held. It protected the ketch from being turned into splinters, and them from being thrown overboard or drowned.

For now.

But how long could Sunny keep shielding their vessel from the rage of the storm?

His reserves of essence were already breached, a lot of it spent by the Crown of Twilight.

Well… one way or another, they were going to find out.

As the ark of shadows was being carried by the raging current, Sunny, Nephis, and Ananke tried desperately to endure the arduous strain of being tossed around by the harrowing cataclysm.

Sunny and Nephis were laying on the wet deck, secured to it by the bonds of shadows, keeping Ananke's small body between them. Pressed tightly against each other, the three of them had no other choice but to suffer the painful impacts of the waves and cling to the last, desperate vestiges of hope.

The violence of the storm, the bone-chilling cold of the mist, and the muffled roars of the wind filled their hearts with dread.

'We will survive this… we will…'

Sunny kept repeating these words inside his head, as if trying to will them into existence.

His reserve of essence was diminishing slightly with each minute.

And so were their chances of making it out of the storm alive.

Chapter-1333: Farewells, The Storm

As Sunny was struggling to keep both himself and Ananke whole in the furious grinder of the storm, he could feel her small body trembling. His own body was soaked in cold water and chilled to the bone. At the same time, he could feel the Neph's radiance breathing warmth into it.

It was more than just warmth, too.

Knowing that it was his shadows that were keeping them safe, Nephis sent her flames to engulf Sunny, strengthening both his body and soul. Most of her light was transferred to him, while the last wisp gently caressed the child priestess.

As the white flame surrounded Ananke, the numerous scrapes and bruises covering her small figure instantly healed. She seemed to relax a little.

…Nephis herself, though, was left devoid of any protection.

The two of them were very close, their arms wrapped around each other, with only the trembling child between them. Resting his head on the wet wood of the deck, Sunny silently looked into Neph's eyes.

They were lightless and tired, numbed by torment and pain.

There was nothing to say.

There was nothing to do, either. The three of them just had to suffer, endure, and pray that Sunny's essence lasted longer than the storm did.

It was more easily said than done.

The shadow ark was being shaken and tossed around by the raging elements like a ball. Even though the harness he had created held them in place, it was still a torturous experience. Sunny had to strain all his muscles to lessen the shock of the terrible impacts, holding on to the mast fittings with all his might.

That task was not in any way easier than the draining and laborious process of scooping up water with an iron bowl. In fact, it was much harder, because he couldn't even stand. He had to protect Ananke, as well.

Being lost in the depths of a cataclysmic storm was not much different from the few moments of destructive havoc he had experienced when the explosives beneath Falcon Scott were detonated. Only, this time, the havoc was going to last much, much longer… hours, most likely, or even days.

Not that these words held any meaning anymore.

The volatile currents of broken time that surrounded them were only growing more wild and unstable. Sunny could feel their sickening influence through the protective bubble that Ananke was still maintaining around the ketch. His thoughts had become tangled, and it was hard to maintain focus.

But he had to… he had to keep the manifested shadows intact, continuously willing their shapes into existence and repairing any damage done to the improvised ark. If Sunny lost concentration, all three of them were going to die.

'Come on... we have already reached so far! Just a little bit more! Just a little!'

It was just that he struggled to remain concentrated more and more.

The ravages of broken time were growing fiercer, but the protections conjured by Ananke were growing weaker.

Soon, Sunny found himself unable to tell when was before and when was after. All that remained was the current moment, the pain in his battered body, the cold mist that stuck to his skin, the warmth of

Neph's flame burning softly in the depths of his being, and the tactile sensations of her and Ananke's bodies pressed against his own.

All he could do was cling to these sensations, to his connection to the shadows, and find strength in their silent presence.

'I have to hold on… I have to…'

But then, slowly, even these feelings grew vague and chaotic.

The storm of broken time invaded his mind completely, extinguishing Sunny's ability to be aware of the world. He was left in a torturous state that was not consciousness, but also not the merciful oblivion of losing it.

'Have… to… hold…'

And then, the torture dissipated, as well.

There was no time.

There was no world.

There was only the storm.

***

A moment passed.

Or maybe an eternity.

He did not know, nor was he able to know.

The world was swaying gently. Its swaying was like a lullaby.

The world smelled of wet wood… and emptiness.

The world was dark.

Sunny was lost comfortably in a sea of darkness.

But then, bright sunlight shone through his eyelids, painting the darkness red.

'...Sunlight?'

Torn from the embrace of comfort by sudden panic, Sunny opened his eyes and sat up with a start.

'No, no, no…'

His aching body screamed from the sudden motion.

His first thought was that his shadow barrier had dissipated. Otherwise, it wouldn't have let sunlight into the ketch… meaning that they were going to be drowned by the storm in a few moments.

But then, Sunny froze.

Why was there sunlight? How could there be, in the roaring darkness of the storm?

It was then that he finally saw the world.

…The beautiful azure sky was clear, with not a cloud in sight. The seven suns hung in its vast expanse, shining softly.

The surface of the Great River was calm and tranquil, its current as steady as it was supposed to be. The flowing water sparkled as it reflected the sunlight.

The shadow barrier had indeed disappeared, but the ketch… was intact.

Sunny took a shaky breath.

They had cleared the storm. They escaped.

"We… we did it."

His whisper was hoarse and quiet.

For a moment, his heart was drowned by a wave of joy and exhilaration.

"We did it!"

...But then, a nameless emotion enveloped him in a cold embrace.

Sunny shivered.

'What… why…'

"Nephis? Ananke?"

He rose to his knees and looked around, searching for their familiar figures.

Neph was there, sitting tiredly with her back against the side of the ketch. But…

A dull, tearing pain suddenly pierced his heart.

'No…'

Sunny's shoulders fell.

'No…'

Ananke... was nowhere to be seen.

The child priestess had disappeared, leaving behind no trace.

All that remained was an empty black mantle that lay on the deck, orphaned and forlorn.

Crawling a step forward, Sunny clutched the mantle and raised it, staring at the dark fabric with hollow eyes.

He remained kneeling for a few moments, unable to move… or think… or feel.

Sunny's soul felt cold, cold… colder even than he had felt in the snowy field outside Falcon Scott.

As he looked at the black mantle, frozen, two hands wrapped themselves around his shoulders, and Nephis hugged him from behind.

"She's gone."

The warmth of her body and the softness of her voice… were like an execution's axe.

Sunny trembled.

Neph held him tighter, as if unwilling to let go.

"The storm must have carried us too deep into the past, far beyond where she was born. And so… she's gone. I'm sorry, Sunny."

The black mantle slipped from his fingers.

Looking down, Sunny gasped for breath.

'But we survived… we survived the storm! Why…'

His vision blurred.

After a while, consumed by pain, he whispered:

"...I am sorry, too."

Chapter-1334: Dire Promise

Sunny and Nephis remained motionless for a while, carried by the indifferent, inevitable current of the Great River. His heart was heavy… too heavy to bear. It was in so much pain that the suffering felt almost physical.

Or maybe it was.

Eventually, the pain turned dull. But the unbearable weight remained.

Slowly raising his hand, Sunny tightly gripped one of Neph's arms. She was still hugging him from behind, so he couldn't see her face. She couldn't see his, either… which was perhaps for the best.

When Sunny spoke, his even voice was low and full of torment:

"Neph…"

He raised his eyes to the distant blue sky.

"Why can't we protect anyone?"

...There was no answer for a while. Eventually, Nephis let out a quiet sigh.

"Because that is not the world we were born into."

She lingered for a moment, her body still pressed against his. Then, she added:

"You and I, and everyone we know… we were born to destroy things, not save them."

Sunny lowered his head, thinking that maybe she was right. The world they lived in — both of the worlds, really — needed killers

more than it needed builders. That was the sign of the dire times they belonged to.

But what was the point of slaying Nightmare Creatures and conquering the trials of the Spell if there was nothing to return to except regret and ruin?

A few moments later, he heard Neph's voice again. Holding him, she said in a hesitant tone:

"I don't know if it helps… but Ananke never intended to return to Weave. She knew that she wouldn't be coming back all along."

Sunny's eyes trembled. Shifting slightly, he turned his head and finally looked at Neph.

"What?"

She sighed.

"What kind of future would it have been, to return and spend the rest of her limitless life alone in the graveyard of everything she loved? She had only held out for that long because of a dream about the Children of Weaver… us… needing her help. Once we were gone, her last reason to remain would have been gone, too."

Nephis looked away.

"That was why the supplies we gathered in Weave were only meant for two people, not three. And why she wanted to tell us about its past so much."

Her voice grew forced and heavy.

"...That was why she took us to the House of Parting, as well. Where the Riverborn come to leave on their last journey. To have a feast with their loved ones before saying farewell."

Neph's usually motionless face contorted slightly. She remained silent for a moment, then said evenly:

"We made her food, listened to her tales, and kept her company along

the way. The order of things might have been wrong… but at least she wasn't alone at the end. We were there to send her off."

Sunny lowered his head, stunned.

'The supplies…'

Why didn't he realize that all the things they had gathered in Weave were meant for the two of them, and not Ananke herself? How could he not have noticed something so obvious?

Perhaps it was because, deep down, Sunny had always known the hideous truth. He had just closed his eyes to it, not wanting to bear its weight, and found solace in convincing himself that they would think of something later… even though there was nothing they could do to change the bitter outcome.

Ananke was gone.

He stared at the wooden boards of the deck, trying uselessly to console himself. He told himself that the woman they knew was not the real Ananke. Of course, it didn't help. He told himself that everything had happened according to her wishes… that disappearing in the embrace of the Children of Weaver was the best death a priestess of the Nightmare Spell could have hoped for.

Of course, it didn't help, either.

In the end, there was only one way to lessen the burden crushing his weary heart.

It was to turn the pain into anger.

Sunny could not bring Ananke back… but he could exact bloody vengeance on those who had doomed her.

'The Mad Prince…'

The image of the odious abomination appeared in front of his eyes. Sunny's face hardened, and his hands slowly turned into fists.

'That bastard might still be out there, somewhere.'

His eyes gleamed with murderous hate.

…But then, Sunny reminded himself who the Six Plagues were. Or rather, who he thought they were.

He remained silent for a while, and then said in a distant voice:

"Neph. You know… I saw the Mad Prince in a dream."

She let go of him and shifted back, allowing Sunny to turn around and look at her. His expression was grim.

He hesitated for a few moments, then forced himself to say:

"I... think I know who he is. Who each of the Six Plagues is. They're us… they're us from the future. Cassie, Effie, Kai, Jet, Mordret, and I… all the members of the cohort. Except for you."

Sunny remembered the dream where the vestige of the Defiled madman had attacked him. The deranged voice calling him a murderer, over and over again.

'Murderer…'

Closing his eyes for a moment, he said quietly:

"Because we killed you. You can't be Corrupted, and so, we must have killed you. That's why there are only six Plagues."

There it was. The thought he was scared to admit to himself, said aloud.

Sunny struggled to keep his emotions suppressed and looked at Nephis, not knowing what her reaction would be.

Her face was motionless, and her beautiful grey eyes were calm… like always. Sunny could usually read the true emotions hiding behind her expressionless mask, but he failed to decipher them this time.

Was she confused? Unbelieving? Angry? Frightened?

Nephis remained silent for a long time.

Then, she looked him in the eyes and said calmly:

"That's great, then."

Sunny blinked.

That… was not the reaction he had expected.

Confused, he frowned and asked, making sure that he had heard right:

"...Great?"

Nephis nodded, as if confirming something obvious.

"Of course. If the Six Plagues are really us from the future… then we know all about them. We know all their strengths, and all their weaknesses. We even know their Flaws."

She smiled slightly out of the corner of her mouth.

"I was worried about having to face them before, but if what you said is true… well, then it changes things. If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If the enemy is yourself, though… everything becomes much simpler, doesn't it?"

Sunny stared at her, stunned.

"Indeed…"

Indeed, she was right.

His eyes widened a little.

If the Mad Prince was truly a future version of himself — a vile apparition from a future where Nephis was dead — then all it took to kill the bastard was to speak their True Name aloud.

If the Devouring Beast was truly a future version of Effie, then killing her would be as easy as isolating the fearsome Plague and denying

her access to sustenance. Before too long, the Defiled abomination would weaken, and her body would consume itself.

If Undying Slaughter was truly the future version of Jet, then they simply had to engage her in a battle for an extended period of time, not allowing the wretched thing to slay anyone and absorb their essence. Eventually, her soul would collapse by itself.

If Torment was truly the future version of Cassie, then her strength lay in her prophetic powers and an incredibly high affinity to revelations and fate. She could not be too formidable physically… so, Weaver's Mask would render her defenseless.

There were the other two, of course. Mordret's Flaw was unknown, and Sunny doubted that he would share it freely. However, the Prince of Nothing would be able to deal with the Soul Stealer personally without revealing his secrets.

Kai's Flaw, meanwhile, was not something that could be exploited to bring him down in battle.

Still… knowing how to kill five out of the Six Plagues was already a brilliant result. It was much better, by far, than facing six harrowing abominations blind.

Sunny had been so shaken and revolted by the dreadful possibility of turning into the hateful Mad Prince that he failed to consider its hidden benefits.

His eyes gleamed darkly.

Looking up, Sunny stared at Nephis silently for a few long, poignant moments.

Then, he said quietly:

"Neph… let's kill the Mad Prince."

His voice slowly grew stronger.

"Let's kill that wretch, and the rest of the Six Plagues with him. Let's slaughter the Defiled. Let's burn Verge to the ground."

He gritted his teeth and leaned forward, his eyes burning with dark murderous intent.

"Let's conquer this horrid Nightmare."

Sunny's words hung in the air for a moment, and were then carried away by the wind.

Nephis remained silent for a while.

Then, she smiled, white flames igniting in her eyes.

"...It's a promise."

[End of Part One: Currents of Time]

Chapter-1335: After the Storm

The Great River was like it had always been — vast, dreamlike, and ceaseless. Its current gently carried the ketch forward, as if the harrowing storm had never happened. The seven suns slowly traveled across the azure sky, which was painted lilac in the east and vibrant crimson in the west.

For a while, Nephis and Sunny remained idle. Their bodies were still reeling from the terrible battle against the raging elements, and so were their minds. The invasive violence of broken time had left them drained and fragile.

Their hearts felt hollow, too.

Sunny silently lay on the wooden deck, staring at the sky. His head was empty, full of nothing but the sensation of a dull ache that radiated from all across his battered body.

It was good to hurt. Pain reminded him that he was alive.

There was the smell of wet wood, the peaceful sound of waves splashing against the sides of the ketch, and the warm sunlight. Most noteworthy of all, there was time.

He had never been aware of just how important the sense of time was before experiencing its absence. And why would he? People did not usually pay attention to immutable things, simply taking them for granted. But as it turned out, those things were not as absolute when higher beings were involved.

Now that they had escaped the storm, the natural flow of time returned in all its glory. Its reliable presence felt… reassuring. Time was at peace once again.

Time flowed.

Eventually, the dull ache permeating his body subsided. The pain in his heart grew duller, as well. New sensations took their place.

Thirst, hunger… caution, determination.

Sunny still felt numb, but his mind was slowly recovering.

He lingered for a while longer, then sat up with a quiet sigh.

The vista of the Great River around them was exactly as before the storm… which posed a bit of a problem.

Some time later, Sunny and Nephis were sitting at the bow of the ketch, looking soberly at several strange tools laying on the deck in front of them. One looked like a bronze astrolabe, another was akin to a sextant, and the third resembled a strange compass. All these had been gifted to them by Ananke, and were meant for navigating the Great River.

Of course, the first one was not really an astrolabe, since there were no stars in the Tomb of Ariel. The second one could be considered a sextant, but the set of principles it was supposed to work on was entirely different from the waking world. The third one could indeed show direction, but it was between past, future, dawn, and dusk instead of north, south, east, and west.

Sunny and Nephis had learned a fair deal about how to use these tools, but not about why they worked. The Great River was not a sphere, like Earth was, and it didn't revolve around a star. Instead, seven artificial suns revolved around the river. Nevertheless, there seemed to be some sort of curvature to it, which neither of them could explain.

It was all a mystery.

Before, Ananke had been their navigator, but now that she was gone, Sunny and Nephis had to chart the course themselves.

Hence, the somber expressions.

Nephis sighed.

"It doesn't make sense. According to this, we are much further downstream than we were supposed to be… weeks worth of sailing away from the Lower House."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"There was still a current when we were inside the storm. Sure, it was wild and chaotic… but the water still flowed in a single direction. Much faster than usual, at that. So, maybe the storm carried us all the way here."

She frowned.

"But we didn't spend weeks inside it. Did we?"

He hesitated, not knowing what to say. Time had been broken within the storm, so it was impossible to tell how long they had been fighting against it. It could have been days, or hours… or months. Especially considering the insidious nature of the frozen time in the eye of the storm.

Distance was equally hard to measure. They had to have been not too far from Weave up until the point when Ananke's protections failed. After that, both Sunny and Nephis had been completely out of their minds for Spell knew how long, losing all awareness of the world.

He grimaced.

"I have no idea, but the fact remains. We are much further downstream than anticipated. So what? It's good news, really. It means that we are already halfway to Fallen Grace."

And its sybil, Dusk.

Fallen Grace was situated in the distant past — not that far from the span of the Great River that corresponded to when the sybils had entered the Tomb of Ariel at the height of the Doom War. A long journey still awaited Sunny and Nephis if they wanted to reach the last human city, but half of it seemed to already be behind them.

Which was indeed a piece of great news, since the battered ketch did not look like it would be able to survive the perils of the Great River

for much longer.

Nephis lingered for a while, then nodded.

"You're right. If everything goes well, we might reach our destination in a couple of weeks."

Her face darkened.

"However, what are the chances that it will? Even though this region of the Great River should be safer than the one we come from, it is by no means safe."

Without Ananke, they were not going to be able to mask the presence of the ketch from the dwellers of the depths as efficiently. There were battles ahead of them, without a doubt… and while the abominations were supposed to be less powerful downstream, the chances of stumbling onto the Defiled increased.

Sunny looked at the wooden deck beneath him with a complicated expression. The ketch had endured a lot in the storm. Too much, really. The fact that it was still in one piece spoke volumes about the craftsmanship of the person who had built it.

But would it survive a clash with a frenzied Nightmare Creature? What about one after that, and one after that?

His face turned grim.

'...I don't think it will.'

Nephis seemed to be thinking the same. They were both worried.

However, there was nothing they could do.

Their only choice was to set sail, and pray to the dead gods.

Full of somber apprehension, Sunny and Nephis got to work without delay.

They raised the two masts back into position and fastened the sails to them. The steering oar was gone, so they fashioned a new one from

the repair materials stored inside the Covetous Coffer, affixing it at the stern of the ketch with the help of one of Neph's Memories, the Dark Shaper.

Then, she spoke the Names taught to her by Ananke and summoned the winds.

The ketch flew downstream once again, cutting the clear waters with its bow.

…Only now, there were two people inside of it instead of three.

Sunny's heart ached.

The Great River glistened as the seven suns shone brightly on its vast expanse. Time slowly passed, the interior of the boat full of tense silence. While Nephis struggled to sustain the forward momentum of the ketch, Sunny stood at the bow and peered into the water, hoping to sense a potential attack before it was too late.

However, they had not seen any Nightmare Creatures that day.

Instead… they saw something that made both Sunny and Nephis freeze, paralyzed by shock.

Looking at the dark silhouette that appeared in the distance, floating aimlessly on the waves, they felt an eerie sense of rejection. As if the world surrounding them was nothing but a dream…

Eventually, Sunny flinched and asked, his voice full of disbelief:

"What… what the hell is it doing here?"

Chapter-1336: Stench of Fate

The small dot that had appeared in the distance slowly drew closer as the ketch approached it, guided by Neph's firm hand. At some point, however, she silently released the Names, allowing the boat to drift forward on its own.

Her gaze was directed forward, a rare rattled expression apparent on her face.

Sunny was no different.

Paralyzed by shock, both of them froze. After a few moments of stunned silence, he flinched and asked in a trembling voice:

"What… what the hell is it doing here?"

His mind was in turmoil, unable to process the truth of what they saw.

In front of them, a battered ship was floating listlessly on the waves. Its silhouette was beautiful and fluid, but there were ugly burn marks and terrible scars littering the graceful wooden hull of the damaged vessel. It looked… like it had escaped from the depths of hell after a long and dreadful battle.

It also looked completely empty, like a ghost ship abandoned by its crew.

But what was truly inconceivable about the drifting ship…

Was the sound of rustling leaves carried from its deck by the wind.

Looking up, Sunny saw the mighty branches of a sublime tree that grew around the eerie vessel's mast.

He knew this ship. He knew it too well.

…It was the Chain Breaker.

The battered vessel in front of them was the ancient flagship of the Fire Hunters, which Noctis had won from them in a gamble. It was also the ship that Cassie and the Fire Keepers had restored to its former glory, and which Sunny named.

Chain Breaker looked almost exactly the same as the last time Sunny had seen it… but also unfamiliar. Apart from the harrowing scars covering its hull, there were also other differences. The hull itself seemed different, with bands of dull metal reinforcing its graceful lines. He did not recognize the fearsome shape of the ship's ram, either.

The vessel looked much fiercer than the one from his memories, resembling an embattled warship more than it did a beautiful yacht.

There were many discrepancies, but the most glaring one was the sacred tree itself. It was much, much taller and more robust than the one Cassie had nurtured, drowning the entire middle section of the ship in the shadow of its crown.

Still… it was the Chain Breaker.

Was it?

No, it couldn't be…

It was inconceivable that the flying ship had somehow found its way into the Tomb of Ariel. Sunny failed to understand how it could have appeared here.

Seeing it felt simply too bizarre.

Shaken, he tore his gaze away from the battered vessel and looked at Nephis. His mouth felt dry.

"How could it be here?"

She hesitated, just as rattled as he was. After a while, she shook her head.

"I don't know. Maybe… maybe it's a different ship. The people who built the Chain Breaker could have created more than one vessel. Maybe."

Both of them knew that the probability of that being the case was extremely low. Noctis had owned the flying ship for the better part of a thousand years, and modified it extensively over the centuries. He had been the one who planted a tree from the Sacred Grove of Heart God on the ship's deck and created the enchantments that connected the two into a single whole, as well.

How could there be another ship like that?

Nephis took a deep breath.

"...Or maybe Noctis had visited the Tomb of Ariel at some point in time. If he did, then his ship would have been carried into the Nightmare by the Spell, just like Daeron of the Twilight Sea was. Because the Great River flows through time."

She frowned.

"Does it look like how it had been when Noctis commanded it? It's different from how it is now. In the waking world, I mean."

Her voice was full of doubt.

Sunny frowned, then looked at the battered ship once more. After a while, he said with uncertainty:

"No… it doesn't look like either the past or the present version of Chain Breaker. It's different from both."

After a short pause, he added:

"Of course, I was with Noctis only at the very end of the thousand years he had spent in the Kingdom of Hope. The ship we traveled on might have looked different before. That guy… he surely rebuilt and modified it many times. The version we saw was only the last out of many."

Was that the reason, then? The copy of the Chain Breaker was here

because Noctis had visited the Tomb of Ariel once upon a time, leaving an imprint for the Spell to conjure back to life?

…If so, then where was the flamboyant sorcerer himself? Why was his ship drifting in the current of time, damaged and abandoned?

That theory was the only one that made any kind of sense… but it was still tenuous at best.

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, both feeling a somber sense of unease.

Eventually, he sighed.

"There's actually a different, more pressing question."

She nodded slowly.

"What are the odds that in the endless vastness of the Great River, we would blindly arrive at the exact spot where this ship is located?"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

Looking away, he remained silent for a while. His thoughts were grim.

'This situation smells, and it's a familiar smell. The stench of fate…'

He looked at the battered ship darkly.

"It can't be a coincidence. Just like Ananke finding us was not a coincidence. The person who had sent her a message through dreams must have intended for us to find the Chain Breaker."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then added:

"In fact, I am willing to bet that this is where the dream told her to point us."

Both of them remained silent for a while, disturbed.

Was it Dusk, the Sybil of Fallen Grace?

Who else could have predicted the future so precisely?

'Someone who can see the strings of fate far better than I can, that's for sure…'

Nephis threw one more glance at the battered ship, unnerved, then shook her head.

"I guess we'll find out soon. For now… we were both worried about the ketch enduring the journey to Fallen Grace, weren't we? Now, there's a nearly indestructible ship in front of us. One that was built to endure a sea of divine flames, no less. It looks damaged, but since it hasn't sunk yet, the damage must not be too crippling."

Sunny stared at her silently for a moment.

"...You want to climb aboard? Are you cr… are you sure?"

She met his gaze and shrugged.

"Why not?"

He remained silent for a bit.

Then, Sunny chuckled wryly and looked away.

"Damnation. I must be crazy myself… because I really want to climb into that ship, too…"

Chapter-1337: Ghost Ship

Bringing the ketch to the towering side of the battered ship… the Chain Breaker… Sunny and Nephis lingered for a while, looking up. Both felt more than a little bit of apprehension, but at the same time, they were relieved.

Traveling across the perilous expanse of the Great River on a mighty ship would be much more reassuring than on a small, damaged sailboat.

Eventually, Nephis summoned the familiar golden rope and glanced at Sunny.

He nodded, then hesitated for a moment.

Bending down, Sunny picked up Ananke's black mantle and looked at it with a forlorn expression. It was the only thing she had left behind… the last reminder of her existence, if one didn't count the ketch itself.

It was also the vestment of the priests of the Nightmare Spell.

He remained motionless for a while, then silently wrapped the mantle around his shoulders.

As soon as his body became shrouded by the dark folds of the nebulous fabric, Sunny felt a strange shiver run down his spine. He had donned the black mantle in honor of Ananke, to have something to remember her by, but the act suddenly seemed deeply symbolic.

It was as though he was devoting himself to Weaver… which Sunny had no intention of doing.

And there was another, far more chilling detail.

'This mantle…'

Was he just imagining things, or was it eerily similar to the tattered rags the Mad Prince wore in the nightmare? It was hard to tell due to how faded and sunburnt the rags were, but if he just pictured what they might have looked like decades, or even hundreds of years ago…

Sunny frowned, his gaze turning dark. But, in the end, he chose to leave the black mantle on.

'That bastard will not define me.'

With that, he took a step forward and joined Nephis, who had already thrown the rope up, tightening the loop at its end around the broken railing of the ghost ship. She gave it a couple of tugs, then nimbly climbed up.

Sunny followed.

A few moments later, they jumped down on the deck of the Chain Breaker.

An eerie feeling gripped his heart.

The deck of the ancient vessel was both familiar and unfamiliar. It was very similar to the one he had spent so much time on — both in the Dream Realm and the Second Nightmare. However, there were also glaring differences.

The very geometry of the main deck seemed slightly different. However, it was hard to tell what the differences were exactly… because it was severely damaged.

Here and there, the wood was splintered and covered in soot, with deep grooves cutting into its surface — as if some enormous beast, or a legion of them, had torn through the ancient wood with monstrous claws. The railings were shattered and broken in many places, the mighty siege engines lay broken and destroyed.

Several massive holes had been punched through the deck, as well, revealing the devastated interior of the ship. Their jagged edges

hinted that something dreadfully powerful had either broken into the cargo hold, or had broken free from it.

There was not a soul in sight.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, wary. Then, without saying anything, he sent his shadows to scout the interior of the ancient vessel.

After a swift and cursory search, they had not discovered anything except for more signs of a furious battle.

He let out a quiet sigh.

"It's empty. There's no one here."

Nephis nodded, lowering the sword that had appeared in her hand as soon as they climbed aboard. She looked around, seemingly more relaxed, and then said calmly:

"Let's explore properly."

They spent some time tentatively exploring the abandoned ship. Everywhere they went, they were met with signs of dreadful devastation. Sunny knew for a fact how enduring the enchanted wooden walls of the Chain Breaker were… he shuddered when imagining what kind of forces could have brought it to such a sorry state.

The last time the flying vessel had been damaged so severely, it was because Cassie had thrown it down from the skies and rammed an immortal Saint at full speed. This time, however, it seemed the ship had withstood a harrowing and prolonged assault before being breached, at which point the fighting continued inside.

Then, it drifted in the currents of the Great River for gods knew how long. As a result, there was nothing left to tell them where and when the ghost ship had really come from, and who had fought in the battle that rendered it broken and empty.

Sunny did not know what kind of beings could have devastated the ancient vessel to such a degree, nor did he know what kind of

defenders could have resisted their assault. Whoever they were, the aftermath of their cataclysmic clash gave him chills.

However… there was good news, as well.

About an hour later, Sunny and Nephis returned to the main deck and rested in the shade of the sacred tree. Their expressions were thoughtful.

Touching the ivory bark, Nephis inhaled deeply.

"The damage is severe, but shallow. There are no leaks, and the ship is not taking on water. While the interior is a mess, the support structures are all holding… it is not going to sink anytime soon."

She lingered for a moment, studying the sacred tree, and added:

"The tree is also alive, and healthy. However, the enchantment circuits are broken. The runic circle at the stern is dormant. We won't be able to fly the Chain Breaker."

Sunny nodded.

"Does any of us even know how to control it? Cassie is usually the one doing the steering. She learned directly from Noctis."

Nephis sighed.

"I don't. Regardless, flying is not an option… that said, we don't need the sacred tree and the enchantments to make the ship move. It still has sails, doesn't it? Even though most sails are either burned or torn, we can repair them. We brought enough supplies from Weave."

He looked around, thinking. The sails were indeed torn, but there were repair kits just for that purpose among the supplies Ananke had left them with. All in all… it seemed that they had everything necessary to turn the Chain Breaker back into a seaworthy vessel, even if the repair job would not look pretty.

There would be... a lot for them to do.

Sunny sighed, then gave Nephis a short nod.

"Let's get to work, then."

Chapter-1338: On the Importance of Needlework and Carpentry

There was a lot of work to be done, and not enough time. The night was already approaching. Sunny and Nephis hastily cleared one of the compartments — the one that corresponded to the captain's cabin on the actual Chain Breaker — intending to use it as shelter.

Too tired to cook, they ate a a cold supper and went to sleep. Sunny did not forget to summon Saint and Fiend to guard them, while Nightmare protected their dreams.

In the morning, both felt more refreshed. Their bodies had mostly recovered from the terrible strain put on them by the storm. Most Ascended would have been rendered weak and helpless by the savage cataclysm for weeks, but Sunny and Nephis each possessed astonishing vitality — he because of Blood Weave, she due to the restorative power of her Aspect.

They got to work as the seven suns slowly rose from the gleaming waters.

On the first day, they planned to clear the main deck of debris. With Sunny, Nephis, Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare all working together, the arduous task of moving terribly heavy pieces of wreckage was not too hard. It took longer to sift through them, separating the things that had to be disposed of from those that could be of use later.

Even though neither Sunny nor Nephis knew how to repair the siege engines, there was a weak hope that someone in Fallen Grace would.

The pieces of splintered wood seemed useless at first glance, but it was still the mystical wood that the Chain Breaker had been built

of… simply tossing something like that into the water did not sit right with either of them, not even mentioning how precious of a resource wood was in the Tomb of Ariel.

There were bent and torn pieces of a strange, supremely durable metal as well. Those were also worth keeping.

In the end, they abandoned the upper deck and started clearing the main cargo hold instead. By the time they were done, it was night again, and both were tired.

…That night, they made a fire under the branches of the sacred tree, and Nephis cooked them food. Her cooking was as delicious as ever, and the quiet rustling of leaves made for a tranquil atmosphere.

However, this was the first time since the dark island that they shared a proper meal with just the two of them enjoying it.

It was so strange… Ananke had not been with them for long, but her absence felt like a gaping hole. Perhaps it was because Sunny and Nephis had witnessed her as a frail old woman, a vigorous matron, a charming young lady, and an innocent child that their time together felt like a lifetime.

That lifetime was now behind them, and new hardships awaited ahead. Time was relentless, washing away all things — both inconsequential and those they held dear.

On the second day, their efforts to prepare the ship for the voyage were more fruitful. With the cargo hold free of debris, they could neatly store everything that was valuable enough to hold on to there. The main deck was soon cleared. Sunny even washed it, trying to get rid of the soot, grime, and something that resembled dried blood.

…Or rather, he made Fiend do it while resting in the shade of the sacred tree and sipping on cold water from the Endless Spring.

On the third day, they cleared one of the two mess halls. After that, however, Sunny and Nephis stopped — they decided to leave the rest of the inner compartments alone, at least until reaching Fallen Grace. They briefly considered cleaning one of the other cabins to have

separate sleeping quarters, but eventually dropped that idea.

It was not like they were unaccustomed to spending the nights in close proximity to each other, anyway. Plus, it was safer — neither of them knew when a sudden attack could come, so staying together was a more pragmatic choice.

And more familiar.

Finally, on the fourth day, they started to work on the sails.

Repairing them was much more arduous of a task than Sunny had imagined… but, unexpectedly, he turned out to be excellent at it. Who would have thought?

Being good with thread and needle was the last thing Sunny had expected when starting to learn the mysterious sorcery of the Demon of Fate, but that was exactly the side effect he was benefiting from right now.

Still, the progress was slow because of just how damaged the sails of the Chain Breaker were. Not to mention that they had to take them down, patch them up, and then fasten the sails back up.

The masts, booms, and spars required some repairs to be done, too. That task was accomplished by Nephis with the help of the materials they had brought from Weave or salvaged from the debris of the ghost ship and the Dark Shaper.

…On the seventh day, they were done with everything they could accomplish in a short amount of time.

The Chain Breaker had transformed. There were still burn marks and scars on its hull, and the main deck still gaped with wide holes… however, the largest of them were now covered with wooden boards, and it was clear of debris.

Saint was standing on the front of the ship with a bow in her hands, serving as their vanguard. Nightmare was hiding in the shadows nearby, while Fiend was protecting the sacred tree.

Nephis stepped into the runic circle at the stern of the ancient vessel

— the circle itself was inactive, but it was still the natural position to take if one wanted to hold the two steering oars of the flying ship. Granted, one of those oars would be useless for now, since it controlled ascent and descent, and the Chain Breaker was unable to fly.

Sunny was standing by her side.

He looked at Nephis and asked, his voice full of anticipation — which was hard not to feel after a whole week of hard labor to prepare for this moment.

"Are you ready?"

Placing her hand on the steering oars, she nodded.

"Let's go. We wasted enough time in the future already."

Turning away, he inhaled deeply and looked at the length of the graceful vessel.

When Noctis had owned it, there was a crew of wooden sailor dolls to work the ship. When the Fire Keepers claimed it, there were Awakened to do the same.

Now, however, there were only Sunny and Nephis… and Nephis had to remain at the stern to guide the Chain Breaker. So, it was his job to work the sails.

Since Sunny had no intention of jumping from mast to mast like a monkey… whatever a monkey was… he concentrated and called upon the shadows.

A few moments later, tenebrous arms manifested themselves into existence all over the ship, pulling on the ropes. It took some concentration to control them all at once, but after the gruelling education of the Antarctic Campaign, Sunny was more than proficient in using Shadow Manifestation. The sails slowly rose, and then filled with wind.

Coming back to life, the ancient ship turned to face downstream, and then slowly started accelerating.

'It's moving...'

They were finally on their way to Fallen Grace.

Chapter-1339: Moving On

The Chain Breaker was steadily advancing down the Great River. The gale Nephis could summon by uttering its name was not powerful enough to push the ship as fast as it had pushed the ketch, but to their luck, the winds were blowing in the same direction.

Carried both by their power and the current of time, the graceful vessel rushed forward at great speed.

All around them, there was nothing but sunlight and sparkling water. The vast expanse of the Great River was beautiful and exhilarating… of course, great horrors were hiding behind the deceptive facade of its beauty.

But nothing had attacked them yet.

…Life went on.

Sitting in the shade of the sacred tree, Sunny felt strangely indignant about that fact.

He had been constantly busy during the week they spent patching up the battered ship, which was a mercy. Now that there was really nothing for him to do, Sunny found himself feeling numb and hollow. His lightless soul seemed even darker than usual these days.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the calming sound of the rustling leaves.

'Just… how much can a person endure?'

He was tired of loss.

He was also tired of losing.

'Sometimes it feels like I was better off not caring about anyone

except myself. Those were the days, weren't they?'

As he smiled crookedly, a familiar voice suddenly resounded from above:

"Do you mean the days of being a frightened, pathetic, miserable little wretch that not a single person in the world cared about, in turn? Well… I suppose it's indeed the best you deserve. That's how you'll end up anyway, eventually."

Opening his eyes, Sunny looked up with a dark expression.

The Sin of Solace was standing above him as if nothing had happened. The loathsome wraith looked like he always had… exactly like Sunny. The bastard was even wearing a perfect copy of Ananke's mantle. His face was full of cold contempt.

Sunny scoffed.

"Wow. Look who decided to show up. I thought you chose to crawl back into whatever pit that had spawned you and never come back. Where the hell have you been?"

The apparition smirked.

"Maybe I just got sick of watching you fail, lose, and get people killed all the time. Even imaginary creatures like me have a limit, you know? Ah, of course you don't. You don't know anything, the fool that you are."

Sunny stared at him for a while, silent. His eyes were cold and somber.

Eventually, he shook his head and said evenly:

"For someone who hates me so much, you sure are too helpful. Why save me from the Mad Prince if you feel that way? Don't you think that you owe me an explanation?"

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Owe you? And you even have the audacity to call someone mad

after spouting such nonsense… I owe you nothing."

He shook his head, then said with a derisive smile:

"Let's make something clear. I did not save you. I just saved myself from having to endure more misery. Being stuck with a hateful worm like you is already bad enough, but being stuck with you if you become Defiled? Gods…that would be truly insufferable."

Sunny tilted his head, thinking.

'So, the secret the Mad Prince wanted to tell me was truly dangerous enough to turn me into a Defiled…'

Or was it? Was he supposed to believe anything that the Sin of Solace said? The sword wraith acted like an independent being, and in a sense, it was… but the source of that being was still Sunny himself, Therefore, the bastard could not know anything that he himself did not know.

The Sin of Solace was a part of his mind, after all.

…Wasn't he?

Sunny frowned.

'To be honest, I have no idea what that thing is anymore.'

He had figured out the nature of the sword wraith in Antarctica, and had even gotten a good grasp of how to deal with the apparition. But once they entered the Tomb of Ariel… that nature seemed to have changed without any explanation.

Why had it changed? And how?

Was it the influence of the Tomb itself? It had been built by the Demon of Dread, after all, from whose whisper the curse that caused the sword wraith to manifest was born. Or was there something more sinister at play?

Staring at the Sin of Solace, Sunny asked:

"What are you, really? How did you know that the Mad Prince in my dream was dangerous? Why did you try to stop him from subjecting me to Corruption?"

The apparition grinned.

Without saying anything, he lingered for a while, then looked down and touched the sleeve of Ananke's dark mantle.

"By the way, what a wonderful mantle. You should really get more people killed and collect a piece of clothing from each one. Then, we'll be able to add an apparel section to the Brilliant Emporium. Ah! Shame you didn't think of that in Antarctica…"

Sunny growled and swiped at the grinning apparition, but he was already gone. The sword wraith had disappeared just as suddenly as he had appeared.

'That bastard!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny leaned back and stared at the swaying branches of the sacred tree. He was full of dark anger.

But...

The appearance of the Sin of Solace had distracted him from his melancholy, at least. Until those last words plunged him right back into dejection.

He sighed.

'I'll learn the truth eventually…'

For now…

He had felt better when he was busy, so the best solution for this dark mood would be to make himself busy once again.

Controlling the sails did not take much of his attention, so Sunny had to do something else.

Luckily, there was a lot for him to do.

He had to continue studying the Estuary Key. He also had to weave a lot of Memories to help Nightmare Ascend, as well as come up with ways to make the members of the cohort stronger.

'Let's get to it, then. There is a week or two left before we reach Fallen Grace. I can achieve a lot in two weeks…'

Abandoning the shade of the sacred tree, Sunny went to the bow of the Chain Breaker, where Ananke's ketch was fastened to the deck. He and Nephis had retrieved it from the water before setting sail, planning to use the ketch as a lifeboat if the need arose.

Summoning the Shadow Chair, he placed it near the battered sailboat, sat down, and looked at the glistening expanse of the Great River.

Then, Sunny sighed and contemplated what task he would tackle first.

Chapter-1340: New Perspective

Sunny remained motionless for a while, thinking. After a few moments, he unconsciously began to fiddle with the hems of the black mantle's sleeves. The smooth fabric glided across his fingertips, making them tingle a little.

Eventually, his gaze settled on it. Sunny tilted his head.

Abandoning his previous plans, he stood up and took off the mantle instead. Then, he sat back down and laid it across his lap.

'I wonder…'

He doubted that it was a simple piece of clothing. It was the attire of a Nightmare Spell priest, after all, most likely passed down to Ananke from her mother — the original priestess who had entered the Tomb of Ariel with the first wave of Outsiders. The corpse under the cathedral in the Dark City had been wearing the same dark garment.

So, it had to have some secrets.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments. Unlike Weaver's Mask, the black mantle was not a Memory — otherwise, it would have disappeared with Ananke. There were some Memories that persisted after the death of their owners, of course, like the Dawn Shard that Nephis had found on the remains of the First Lord of the Bright Castle.

But the nebulous mantle was not one of those, either. Otherwise, it would have bound itself to Sunny the moment he picked it up.

It seemed to be a perfectly mundane robe, albeit sewn from some mystical material. Nevertheless, he shifted his perception and tried to look within the mantle, just in case.

He was not disappointed.

'Huh?'

There was indeed a spellweave hidden within Ananke's mantle. And it was… a strange one.

'How… odd.'

Sunny studied the weave of ethereal strings with a perplexed expression.

There were all the elements that a spellweave was supposed to be made of — a radiant nexus and an intricate tapestry of essence threads. However, the pattern of the ethereal strings was very different from what Sunny was accustomed to.

It was elegant and vast, but… how could he put it… the weave of the dark mantle was infinitely less labyrinthine than that of every Memory in his possession. It was by no means crude, but also not nearly as complicated as them.

He studied the strange spellweave for a few minutes, then leaned back, bewildered.

'...It's not there!'

When Sunny studied the weave of a new Memory, he always searched for the familiar patterns first, to use as a starting point — the universal patterns that all Memories shared, and which were the first sorcery he himself had woven. The connection to the soul of the owner, the ability to manifest from and dissipate into soul essence, the ability to self-repair in the Soul Sea…

But the weave of Ananke's mantle lacked these fundamental patterns.

He blinked a couple of times.

'What…'

Suddenly, Sunny realized a simple fact. Although all the Memories he had seen shared these traits… that was simply because they had all come from only two sources.

One source was the Nightmare Spell, and the other source was Sunny himself. More than that, his knowledge of weaving had mostly come from studying the weaves created by the Nightmare Spell.

The Memories created by the enchanters of Valor weren't different, either. That was because while they forged enchanted weapons using unique Aspects, the Spell served as an intermediary in the process — crafting Memories was an innate ability of the Valor family, not a learned skill like their knowledge of runic sorcery or Sunny's knowledge of weaving.

So, in the end, both sources were one and the same.

But that was not the only way of going about weaving enchanted items… only the ultimate way.

The weave he was looking at right now, though, had been created by someone else. Perhaps by the High Priest of the Nightmare Spell Ananke had spoken about, or by one of his students…

Which was why it was a sorcerous item enchanted through weaving, but not technically a Memory.

Sunny scratched his head.

'So something like that can exist, too…'

Of course, it could! The fact seemed so obvious in hindsight, and yet, he had never considered such a possibility before. Mostly because it was really hard for a human mind to think outside a familiar framework. Every Memory Sunny had known was an item enchanted through weaving, and so, he subconsciously assumed that all items enchanted through weaving were Memories.

But they didn't have to be, like the mantle in front of him.

...Which was a curious detail, but not exactly useful.

Who wouldn't want to turn their weapon or attire into a Memory? The traits of Memories that everyone took for granted were supremely useful. The ability to carry a whole arsenal inside your soul alone was a boon any warrior would kill for.

Swords that sharpened themselves, suits of armor that repaired any damage done to them and adjusted themselves to perfectly fit the body of the wearer… there were too many benefits to Memories to count.

By all accounts, they were the culmination of weaving. Well, technically, the Nightmare Spell itself was the culmination of weaving — but for all those who weren't inconceivable deities like the Demon of Fate, Memories were the absolute peak of enchantment.

However, Sunny's heart still skipped a beat, and his eyes glistened with dark excitement.

Ananke's mantle might not have been superior to the powerful Memories he possessed. At a cursory glance, its enchantments were nothing special. Its Rank and Tier were also not that stunning.

But to him, it was a priceless treasure… for a single reason.

It was because its weave was different from every weave he knew, and much simpler than them at that.

Sunny's whole skill as a sorcerer had come from comparing the patterns of different enchantments to each other and trying to deduce the common logic behind them. But all those enchantments followed the principles set by a single creator — the Nightmare Spell.

Now that he had an enchanted mantle that had come from an entirely different school of weaving, his ability to compare and deduce the fundamental principles of sorcery could take a qualitative leap. It was like witnessing an entirely different framework, and gaining a deeper understanding of your own by studying the differences and commonalities between them.

It didn't matter how simple the spellweave of Ananke's mantle was. What mattered was that it could not only teach Sunny the unfamiliar ways of its creator, but also help him push his own skill forward… by a lot.

Just when he needed it.

Sunny gripped the smooth fabric in his fists, staring at it intently.

After a while, he said quietly:

"Thank you, Ananke."

With that, he cut out all distractions and concentrated on studying the odd weave.

Chapter-1341: Learning the Hard Way

Sunny was more of a copycat than an actual sorcerer. Most of his repertoire consisted of recreating the weaves of various enchantments he had gleaned from his own Memories, not creating those of his own.

Of course, even that was already a stunning achievement. Armed with nothing but his intelligence and a bit of intuition granted to him by Blood Weave — as well as the ability to see weaves, in the first place — he taught himself the most fundamental principles of sorcery. The wondrous sorcery of the Demon of Fate, which very few beings had ever been able to wield.

At this point, Sunny had barely taken the first step away from blindly copying the spellweaves, tentatively trying to disassemble and modify them to serve his whims. The Siege Souvenir, a unique Memory he had created to slay the Fallen Titan Goliath, was the result of these attempts.

But Sunny was still a mere novice, all things considered. He was leagues away from true sorcerers… like the mysterious being who had created the Estuary Key, for example. That weave was simply beyond his imagination. He couldn't even imagine how long it would take him to reach the same transcendent level of mastery. A few hundred years, perhaps? A millennium?

So, Sunny had no illusions about his achievements. They were rather astonishing when compared to other modern Awakened, but that was only because most of those Awakened knew absolutely nothing about sorcery. In the grand scheme of things, his skill was negligible.

…Or so he thought before taking a look at the weave of Ananke's mantle.

'Huh? Wait… what is going on…'

The tapestry of ethereal strings shone in the darkness, laid bare in front of his altered eyes. It was much simpler than the infinitely complex weaves created by the Spell, but still… wasn't he comprehending it a little bit too fast? It was almost like an open book.

'That part of the pattern is responsible for enhancing durability, that one has something to do with fire… ah, it's making the mantle non-flammable. That one makes it waterproof. Then what do these strings do? Hmm. Looks familiar. Right!

If I scale the size and complexity of this part by… a lot… it would be similar to a fragment of [Living Stone]. The basic structure is the same. Which is also the basic structure of the universal restorative trait of all Memories. So it's self-repair, then…'

Sunny opened his eyes wide and leaned back.

"...What the hell?"

How was he suddenly so good at reading weaves? Before, he could only feel a slight inkling of understanding about the nature of certain enchantments, but now, he was somehow able to see the intent behind various sections of the ethereal tapestry almost clearly. Despite it being a completely unfamiliar way of weaving.

It just looked very… understandable.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Don't tell me…'

A sudden guess appeared in his mind. He gave the black mantle a dubious look, then let out a small laugh.

'I'll be damned.'

The weaves the Spell created were infinitely ingenious and near perfect, and as a result, they were all unimaginably complex and intricate. It was to such a degree that Sunny had to spend weeks

studying the simplest ones, and even that was only due to his better-than-average memory and innate talent.

He had been bashing his head against this daedal wall for about two years now, and for every grain of knowledge he gained, there were a hundred he failed to decipher and comprehend.

The weave of Ananke's mantle was also elaborate enough to make a person dizzy, but it was nowhere near the complexity of the tapestries the Spell created. And so… it seemed that after being tempered by the latter, Sunny had grown skilled enough to more or less discern the general flow of the former.

It was as though he had been learning to read by perusing an abstruse epic poem without ever even laying eyes on an alphabet book. The weave of the mantle, meanwhile, was not primitive enough to be called an alphabet, but it was something that a middle schooler would be able to read.

And after braving the weaves of the Spell, Sunny had learned enough to be considered one such middle schooler.

He covered his face with his palm and remained motionless for a while.

'Right… it's just like being sent to the Forgotten Shore. After returning from there, we were also constantly bewildered by how weak normal Awakened seemed. Greater obstacles forge greater strength. As long as you can actually survive them, of course, which most of us didn't.'

He was both the survivor of the Forgotten Shore and of learning sorcery by studying the Spell at work. As such, the work of actual weavers was like... strangely accessible.

Sunny shook his head, then calmed down and looked back to Ananke's mantle.

'Right. This is great news, then. Not only will I be able to understand its enchantments faster, I will also be able to use them as a replacement for a text book and propel my weaving forward.

Hopefully, I mean... it's still not exactly an alphabet book.'

He spent the rest of the day studying the odd weave. It was not simple by any means, but after suffering the appalling complexity of the immaculate weaves created by the Spell, Sunny almost enjoyed the process.

In the end, he realized that the black mantle was not that mysterious of an item.

The masks the priests wore were the true treasures, while their attire was mostly meant to serve a practical purpose. It was still a precious heirloom, of course… the fabric itself seemed to be a Transcendent material, very similar to the Night Silk from which Noctis had once sewn him a garment. In fact, it might have been the very same silk.

It was fashioned in a way that obfuscated the wearer's physical features, and enchanted to be supremely durable, stealthy, and enduring… all qualities that the persecuted priests of the Nightmare Spell would have needed in their perilous journeys.

A perfect attire for heretical evangelists who often found themselves being hated and hunted by the people they were trying to convert.

…Or an ill-fated Awakened who often found himself having to deal with all kinds of unspeakable horrors.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then summoned Weaver's Needle and got to work modifying the weave of the nebulous black mantle. Black threads joined the ethereal strings of soul essence.

By the time the seven suns drowned in the water and the Great River shone with iridescent radiance, he lowered his hands and heard the Spell whispering into his ear:

[You have received a Memory, Ananke's Mantle.]

Chapter-1342: Nebulous Mantle

It didn't take a lot of effort to add the basic patterns of a Memory to the weave of the black mantle. That was what he had been doing over and over again to supply the Brilliant Emporium with inventory, after all. By now, weaving them was almost muscle memory.

They did not put a lot of pressure on a weave, either. Even Dormant Memories of the First Tier could bear the weight… the nexus of the mantle had been fashioned out of a Transcendent soul shard, so Sunny did not even have to integrate a second node into the ethereal tapestry.

It was a bit tricky to make the two different schools of weaving flow into each other, but since Sunny's method was the more intricate one and not the other way around, solving that problem proved to be trivial.

Just like that, he gained a new Memory at the cost of a few shadow strings.

Enjoying the view of the shimmering Great River, Sunny smiled tiredly. Studying hard was an exhausting process, but he welcomed the fatigue. It was a sign that he had made progress. He didn't regret turning the mantle into a Memory, either — even if it wasn't useful, he would have been reluctant to part with it.

All things that weren't stored within his soul would be lost at the end of the Nightmare. If he had been cognizant of that fact earlier, he would have had a better memento of Noctis than a luxurious chair.

…Although he had nothing really to complain about, considering that the Shadow Chair was actually one of his most valued Memories.

Sunny summoned the runes. Ananke's Mantle was there, at the end of the list.

Even though he more or less already knew what the runes would say, he still read them.

Memory: Ananke's Mantle.

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Garment.

Sunny smiled faintly. Garments were a rare type of Memory, since the better ones were classified as armor by the Spell. Those that did not make the cut were generally less useful, but their benefit was that they could be worn in conjunction with an armor-type Memory. Like the Dark Wing, which he had been using ever since the Forgotten Shore.

He continued reading, feeling a pinching pain in his heart:

Memory Description: [This mantle once belonged to Ananke of Weave, Priestess of the Nightmare Spell. She met the Children of Weaver in a nightmare and guided them across the perilous currents of time. Her wisdom was radiant, and her kindness was a blessing.

May she rest in peace.]

The Spell had not written that description. Sunny had written it himself. He had tried to come up with the right words, but they all rang hollow. In the end, he had simply written a few awkward sentences, not knowing what else to do.

Unsatisfied, Sunny looked away from the description.

'No one else is going to see this description, anyway. Only Nephis and me.'

Eventually, he grimaced and concentrated on the enchantments. The runes read:

Memory Enchantments: [Enduring], [Concealing], [Tasteless].

[Enduring] made the mantle durable, resistant against the elements, and capable of repairing itself. [Concealing] masked the presence of its wearer — the mystical kind of presence powerful Awakened possessed.

[Tasteless], though… was a rather strange enchantment, if it could even be called that. From what Sunny could see, it didn't do anything. It was just there, containing nothing except for its name and description.

The description read:

[Tasteless] Enchantment Description: "Why did it have to be black?".

'Huh...'

Which was rather perplexing. The people wearing the mantle would not have been able to read the description unless they were sorcerers themselves, which most of the priests of the Nightmare Spell had not been. So, the mysterious creator of the enchanted garment seemed to have left that odd message for no one in particular.

Sunny shook his head.

'That person must have been a bit of a lunatic… also, what are they talking about? Everything looks better in black!'

Each rune of the description demanded essence strings to be wasted, after all. And weaving them took both effort and time. So, only a crazy person would go around weaving unnecessary runes…

Sunny coughed, remembering his own track record. Back in the Antarctic Center, he had once sent Nephis a message through a Memory called "I Am Stuck in an Endless Tunnel Full of True Darkness. How the Hell Do I Get Out? Ask Cassie".

Was there really a need to add "the hell" to the actual question? No.

But did it feel good to add it?

Hell yes.

Looking down in embarrassment, he put on the tasteful black mantle and rose. Leaving the Shadow Chair by the ketch, Sunny rubbed his face and went to find Nephis.

He had gained a lot of insights from studying the weave left behind by an unknown sorcerer. It felt like his understanding of sorcery was on the precipice of taking a qualitative leap in the coming days… he would have to do a lot more work, of course, as well as digest all his gains.

However, Sunny already had a few ideas on how to proceed.

Right now, he lacked the soul shards to do anything significant. There were a few that Ananke had used while fishing, to lure the Nightmare Creatures, but those were of lesser Ranks. He was meaning to use them to create Memories for Nightmare to consume.

That said…

He still had the Supreme soul shard that they had scavenged from the Black Turtle. Which meant that he could potentially create a Supreme Memory.

Of course, it was not that simple. Scaling an enchantment was not as simple as replacing the nexus of a weave. Most of them could not be scaled at all, and those that could required the weave itself to be vastly modified and improved.

After all, strings made out of Awakened soul essence could not endure the flow of Transcendent energies. The patterns themselves had to be adjusted, as well, to account for the increased burden. Not to mention that enchantments were usually limited by their own nature… infusing them with more potent essence would simply be a waste.

It was a proper mess.

However…

When Sunny asked himself how to empower the members of the cohort and make them capable of facing the perils of the Tomb of Ariel better, he couldn't help but think back to the Forgotten Shore,

where they had also been forced to fight abominations one or even two Ranks above them.

How had they been able to survive that crucible?

There were a lot of reasons why they had, but one of the most significant ones… was a single Memory.

A Memory that could empower all other Memories, and which had been the primary goal of their lethal expedition across the Crimson Labyrinth, to the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains.

The Dawn Shard.

So… what if Sunny did not create a Supreme Memory, but instead elevated the Dawn Shard to the Supreme Rank?

Wouldn't that be the most efficient way of making the cohort stronger?

Chapter-1343: Crown of Dawn

The deck of the Chain Breaker was dark, illuminated only by the pale glow of the iridescent water that gleamed below. The radiance of the Great River at night was usually beautiful, but today, it seemed ghostly.

Sunny was not disturbed by the darkness, of course, but he had to think about Nephis as well.

'We should probably place a few lanterns around the ship.'

The light of the lanterns could potentially attract Nightmare Creatures, but that was not really a problem — not because they were not wary of the abominations, but because gaining their attention was more or less inevitable.

Thinking about when their first battle would happen, Sunny approached the stern of the ship.

Nephis was still standing in the runic circle, holding the steering oar. There was a luminous Memory placed on the deck near her feet, creating a small island of warm orange glow in the ocean of darkness.

In that orange light, her beautiful face was pale and lifeless. She had been guiding the ship the entire day, and the accumulated fatigue was taking its toll.

He listened to the wind, determining its direction.

'It's blowing from the future.'

Stepping into the light, Sunny smiled and gestured to the oar.

"Go rest. I'll take it from here."

He could not use the sorcery of Names yet, but since the winds were

on their side, the Chain Breaker could do without its support for now. Losing some speed was not going to delay them by much.

In fact, both Saint and Fiend were intelligent enough to keep the ship on course. Sunny preferred to let them stand guard for now, though.

Studying his face for a few moments, Nephis nodded and let go of the oar. As she stepped out of the runic circle, Sunny entered it.

"Wait."

He caught her hand in his own and lingered for a few moments. She stared at him with an incredulous expression.

"That Memory of yours, the Crown of Dawn. Can you lend it to me for a few days?"

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Sure? Why?"

Sunny simply shrugged.

"I want to see if I can improve it a little. Don't get your hopes up, though… chances are, nothing will end up happening. It's worth a try, at least."

She hesitated for a couple of moments. Then, a spark of energy traveled from her hand into his own.

The Spell whispered, its voice as enigmatic as ever:

[You have received a Memory, Dawn Shard.]

Sunny smiled.

"Thank you. Now, go rest. I'll wake you up if some abyssal horror attacks us from below the waves, I promise."

Nephis stared at him somberly.

"...You could have just said 'sweet dreams', you know?"

He grinned.

"Oh, I do. But where's the fun in that?"

Shaking her head, Nephis freed her cool hand from his grasp, picked up the luminous Memory, and left. Sunny remained standing in the darkness for a while, staring at the empty space where she had just been.

Then, he sighed, glanced at his empty hand, and placed it on the steering oar.

"Ah. It's so lonesome, sailing across a river of unholy titan's blood in the dark…"

With that, Sunny summoned the Dawn Shard.

A simple band of bright metal appeared in his free hand, decorated with a single gem. The Crown of Dawn did not look that impressive at first glance. It was more austere than opulent… and yet, that simple circlet was the reason Sunny, the members of the cohort, and the Fire Keepers had been able to return from the Forgotten Shore.

Its single enchantment was extraordinarily powerful. The Dawn Shard empowered all Memories in a large radius around it. Back on the Forgotten Shore, that empowerment had been strong enough to elevate the Awakened weapons of the Dreamer Army to resemble Ascended ones in terms of lethality.

Which was an inconceivable boon, considering that there was no limit to the number of Memories the Crown of Dawn could enhance. It was a passive enchantment, as well.

That was how they had been able to slay Fallen abominations.

Sadly, its usefulness diminished more and more as Nephis and her allies grew stronger and acquired better equipment after escaping the Forgotten Shore. The Dawn Shard could still empower Ascended Memories to a substantial degree, but nowhere near elevating them to an entire new Rank. The effect on Transcendent Memories was even more modest.

Considering the type of enemies Sunny and the members of the cohort would have to face in the Third Nightmare, that augmentation was all but insignificant.

But what if he elevated the Crown of Dawn itself from an Ascended Memory to a Supreme one?

Sunny doubted that he would be able to perform a flawless alteration. But even if he managed to make the Dawn Shard as powerful as a Transcendent Memory by outfitting it with a Supreme soul shard, the result would already increase their chances of prevailing against Great Nightmare Creatures by a lot.

Before, he would not have even dared to try…

But now, he had two advantages. The first one was the push studying Ananke's Mantle had given him. The second one was the nature of the Crown of Dawn itself.

The first time Nephis had used it, Sunny saw the weaves of his Memories growing more radiant, each nexus and ethereal string shining with brighter light. The augmentation either strengthened the Memories by empowering their weaves, or made the weaves stronger to withstand the increased power of the Memories.

In any case, the result was the same. The essence strings became more robust.

And the first Memory the Dawn Shard empowered was itself. Its weave was always augmented by its own effect… perhaps that was the reason why this Ascended Memory could possess such an unreasonable power.

So, it was more or less a perfect Memory for Sunny to try and transplant the Supreme shard into. His major concern was that strings weaved from lesser essence would not be able to withstand the burden of channeling superior energies, but what if they were made more durable by those very same energies?

The weave of the Crown of Dawn was much too complex for him to recreate, but modifying it was different… probably.

He wouldn't know until he took a look.

Sunny shifted his perception and peered into the bright metal, trying to discern the underlying weave of the Shard Memory. Soon, an inconceivable tapestry of ethereal strings appeared in front of his eyes, shining in the darkness.

Holding the oar, he smiled wistfully and took a deep breath.

"Let's get to work…"

Chapter-1344: On Course

The weave of a Shard Memory was subtly different from an ordinary one. They possessed some unique qualities, after all, like the ability to remain in existence after the owner's death, or the hidden purpose of manifesting the Oath Keys after all seven had been gathered in one place.

Luckily, Sunny possessed two Shard Memories of his own — the Midnight and Moonlight Shards — so he already knew how to find and isolate these sections of the tapestry, which was supposed to make the task of deciphering the rest of it easier.

…In theory.

In practice, the spellweave of a Shard Memory was even more labyrinthine than that of a normal Memory. Sunny had managed to gain a sufficient level of understanding of the Midnight Shard — enough so to apply a part of its enchantment to the Siege Souvenir — but the Moonlight Shard still remained beyond his grasp.

Which was a shame, because the ghostly stiletto possessed one of the most useful enchantments Sunny had ever seen — it was able to appear instantly, without wasting any time manifesting itself from the sparks of essence. If Sunny could master that single enchantment, all Memories he created would gain a lethal edge.

The more powerful a Memory was, the longer it took to manifest. So, as the Awakened reached higher Ranks of power, they had to be more and more strategic about when to summon their Memories.

Considering that he was unable to master the weave of the Moonlight Shard to this day, the Dawn Shard could very well prove to be a similarly tough nut to crack.

As Sunny stared at the vast tapestry of ethereal strings hidden within

the band of bright metal, the corner of his eye twitched.

'Yeah…'

This… was not going to be easy.

'But I can do it.'

He was certain of it. Recreating the whole weave was out of the question, but modifying it… armed with the insights he had gained and would gain from Ananke's Mantle, he felt confident in his chances.

It was just going to take a lot of effort, and a lot of time.

'How do I transplant a new nexus without collapsing the whole weave? How do I ensure that superior essence actually produces a superior result? How do I prevent the less resilient sections of the weave from being torn apart by the increased burden on them?'

All these questions required answers… there were many more problems to solve, as well. Sunny had never tried something quite as ambitious as turning a powerful Ascended Memory into a tremendously more powerful Supreme Memory.

One thing was certain — it would require an inhuman level of finesse and precision. It would also require a lot of additional essence strings.

And a lot of ingenuity, of course.

The task was daunting, but Sunny did not feel discouraged. Instead, he felt almost… excited.

It beat patching up sails or drowning in a foul mood, at least.

Comfortably resting his back against the bending surface of the tall aplustre, he moved the oar a little and peered into the shimmering spellweave.

***

By the time the seven suns rose from the water, Sunny felt like his head was on the verge of exploding. However, he also felt satisfied with his progress.

Standing in the runic circle at the stern of the graceful vessel, Sunny was holding the Dawn Shard in one hand. His other hand was resting on the steering oar.

…His other four hands danced in the air and weaved strings from his flowing shadow essence. Those were manifested from the shadows, of course.

Sunny had been long accustomed to using an additional pair of shadow arms — it was not too hard for him, considering his experiences in the Second Nightmare. The most difficult part was actually learning how to manifest sufficiently intricate hands from shadows, but he had mastered that in Antarctica, as well.

While studying the weave of the Crown of Dawn, though, he understood that the finesse he would need to alter it was not something a human could achieve. Two hands and ten fingers were simply not enough… and neither were four hands and twenty fingers, at least not at his current level of skill.

So, remembering his dream of being Weaver, Sunny tried to manifest not two, but six additional arms. Finely controlling eight hands at the same time had turned out too much for his mind, however. Even with the help of the Shroud of Dusk, he could not manage that many.

It was one thing to pull on the ropes to raise sails, or rip Nightmare Creatures to shreds. Those were crude actions that did not require a lot of finesse. Weaving, on the other hand, demanded absolute precision. Displacing a string by a hair's breadth could mean the difference between success and failure.

In the end, Sunny had to dismiss two shadow arms and be satisfied with only having six hands.

'Who walks around with only six arms? That's simply unreasonable… embarrassing, really!'

At that moment, Nephis emerged from the lower deck, rubbing her face sleepily. She glanced at Sunny and nodded… then froze and looked at him again.

After a while, she shook her head slightly, sighed, and continued on her way to examine the ship and practice her swordsmanship.

Some time later, the smell of delicious food being cooked reached Sunny's nose.

He smiled.

'Time for breakfast, I guess.'

Commanding Saint to replace him at the steering oar, Sunny dismissed the Dawn Shard and went to find Nephis.

They ate in the shade of the sacred tree, enjoying the warm sunlight and the refreshing breeze. After a while, she asked:

"Aren't you going to rest?"

Sunny leaned back, satisfied, then shook his head.

"Not yet. I can go without sleep for a couple more days… there's a lot I want to achieve before we reach Fallen Grace."

He had to continue studying Ananke's Mantle, alter the spellweave of Dawn Shard, create Memories for Nightmare to consume... and more.

She frowned a little.

"Mental fatigue will slow you down. Your mind needs time to recover, too."

He smiled.

"I know. I have the Shroud of Graceless Dusk, remember? The same Dusk we are on our way to visit. It helps me recover from exhaustion, both physical and mental, faster. I'll be alright."

Time waited for no man, and there was no rest for the wicked. Sunny

was not overestimating himself, he just knew exactly how much he could endure.

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then nodded.

"Alright. Suit yourself."

He suddenly remembered something.

"Ah! After I am done with the Dawn Shard, I want you to teach me how to use the Sorcery of Names. I didn't want to split my focus before… but now I feel like it can help me advance faster in my own skills. Probably. Alright?"

She nodded again.

After finishing the breakfast, they used the esoteric navigation tools to make sure that the ship had not strayed off course. Then, Nephis took her place in the runic circle again, while Sunny sat on the deck a few meters away and continued studying the Crown of Dawn.

Several days passed in that manner. The two of them spend most of their time together, and some time apart. They resumed their sword training, involving Saint as well. The deck of the graceful ship was often filled with the sound of clashing steel.

When the two of them were not sparring, though… Sunny had a different task for the graceful knight.

Now that Fiend had grown into a proper Devil, it was time for him to learn combat mastery, too.

The steel Shadow's most fearsome weapons were his claws and teeth, so Sunny instructed Saint to teach him in hand-to-hand combat. Since she was a master of all types of combat, that did not stump her one bit.

…Hearing Fiend crash into the wooden deck over and over again, Sunny smiled from the corner of his mouth and continued weaving. Memories of his own painful training with Saint, all that time ago in the Dark City, made him feel a bit of compassion for the ravenous steel ogre.

Of course, the lucky bastard possessed the [Marvel] Attribute, which made him capable of learning new things at astonishing speed. Sunny was actually curious to see which of them would absorb Saint's lessons faster.

Granted, Sunny had learned combat mastery from her while hunting down lethal abominations in the Dark City in order to survive. Fiend, in comparison, had all his needs cared for by a kind, generous, and benevolent master.

Who wouldn't learn fast with such a benefactor?

Everything was peaceful for these first few days.

Then, they suffered the first attack.

Chapter-1345: Monster Herders

"You are wasting your time."

"You will definitely fail."

"Just give up. You know you're not smart enough to accomplish anything worthwhile."

"Do you really want to make the woman holding your leash stronger? How foul."

"Your collection of failures just keeps growing, huh?"

…Ignoring the Sin of Solace, Sunny leaned against Ananke's ketch as he studied the Dawn Shard. His shadow hands continued to weave strings of essence. His concentration remained unbroken.

He even welcomed the derisive comments. The more the hateful wraith berated him, the more Sunny felt like he was on the right track. The Sin of Solace would not have bothered to interfere if there was no chance of success, after all — it was not in his nature to bet against Sunny when there were no stakes.

"What, you are ignoring me now? Or have you forgotten how to speak?"

Sunny threw a calm glance at the apparition, then turned back to the Crown of Dawn.

"We'll speak when you tell me how you knew about the Mad Prince."

The Sin of Solace scoffed.

"Gods. Why do I even bother? I am sick of this tired routine!"

He laughed bitterly, then added in a resigned tone:

"But there's nothing else to do. How boring."

The Chain Breaker was swaying gently underneath them. Saint was standing guard at the bow, Fiend and Nightmare were guarding the sacred tree, and Nephis was at the stern, steering the ship.

The seven suns had already descended into the depths of the Great River, and the deck was illuminated by a scattering of lanterns. The water glowed softly, diluting the impenetrable darkness of the night with ghostly opalescence.

Sunny smiled faintly.

"...Find a hobby."

The Sin of Solace stared at him, unamused. Then, he turned to the bow of the ship and sighed.

"At least there's spectacle."

Sunny paid it no attention.

"Uh-huh…"

Then, he hurriedly dismissed the Dawn Shard and jumped to his feet.

'Crap!'

Lunging forward, he felt the Chain Breaker shudder as a violent wave hit it from the side.

[Neph, we are under attack!]

Out there in front of the graceful ship, about a hundred meters away, the water had grown bleak and restless. A vast and ancient shadow was rising from the depths, surrounded by countless smaller ones. Twisting tendrils stretched toward the surface.

…Standing on the bow, Saint calmly raised her warbow and drew its string. Pure darkness flowed from the seams of her onyx armor, enveloping the black arrow that had manifested itself out of thin air. A moment later, she set it loose.

The arrow disappeared into the glowing water without a trace.

[...You have slain a Corrupted Beast, Drowned Outcast.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Saint was already drawing the bow again.

At the same time, long tentacles exploded from beneath the waves, rising above the Chain Breaker like dark, glistening towers. Shuddering, Sunny remembered his first night on the Forgotten Shore.

'Damnation… I'm going to have to repair the sails again!'

Smaller shapes were rising from the restless water and scaling the sides of the ship, swift and nimble. Sunny saw the pale glow reflecting on the blades of crude spears.

In the darkness below the tree, Fiend's eyes ignited with an incinerating red glow. The shadows around him moved, releasing a tenebrous stallion with adamantine fangs from their embrace.

An explosion of white radiance drowned the stern of the Chain Breaker in blinding light.

[Go. I'll handle things here.]

Hearing Neph's response, Sunny ran past Saint…

And jumped over the railing without ever slowing down. A moment later, he plunged into the cold water, rushing to meet the horror that was rising from the depths.

It was there, a massive shape that stretched its giant tentacles toward the moving vessel. Enormous, ancient, and harrowing… Sunny felt hundreds of eyes pierce him with an inhuman gaze, all belonging to the same creature.

'A Tyrant?'

Sunny's figure grew indistinct, surrounded by countless shadows.

Then, the maw of a furious sea serpent emerged from the darkness, bellowing in rage as it shot into the boiling depths. The long serpentine body followed, encased in onyx armor.

The Great River stirred.

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Some time later, Sunny climbed onto the deck of the Chain Breaker and huffed, red drops falling from his hair. He was drenched in blood… of course, that blood was not his.

There was a sizable sack in his hands. That sack was actually Ananke's Mantle — which was resistant to water — its sleeves tied in a knot.

Inside the improvised sack, two sizable Transcendent soul shards glimmered softly in the dark.

Sunny checked on them, then looked around the deck.

'Why did I even wash it? I mean… why did I even have Fiend wash it?'

The deck was littered with corpses. The creatures that had died here — cut, torn apart, and burned to ashes — resembled a weird mix between humans and sea creatures. They had humanoid torsos with pale skin, while their legs were replaced by long, powerful black tentacles. Their bodies were emaciated, with ghastly growths covering them like barnacles.

The sight was both repulsive and inspiring.

'Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare earned me a few shadow fragments. Even better, there are plenty of soul shards to be harvested in addition to the ones I brought back.'

The depth dweller he had killed was not a Tyrant, in the end. It was just a huge, nasty Corrupted Monster… it seemed that these Drowned Outcasts were not its minions. Instead, the smaller creatures appeared to have herded the enormous monstrosity, using it to attack larger prey.

'Waste of essence.'

If Sunny knew that in advance, he would have used the Nimble Catch and the Sin of Solace to cut the depth dweller down.

He froze for a moment, suddenly stunned by how odd the situation was.

'...Wait, since when am I so dismissive of Corrupted Monsters? That thing could have easily finished me if I wasn't careful. Damn it. Am I becoming arrogant? Arrogance gets people killed.'

Sunny was strong and skilled, but he wasn't invulnerable. Even though he could easily slaughter dozens of Fallen abominations or face Corrupted ones without fear, each of them could very well end his life with one strike… maybe two, considering the defensive properties of the Marble Shell.

'I better correct this attitude, fast.'

"Oh my. What a rare moment of self-reflection. You should correct the rest of your nasty personality, while you're at it. Maybe then people won't find you as uncomfortable to be around as they do now."

Looking up darkly, Sunny saw the sword wraith staring at him with disdain. The Sin of Solace was still as annoying as he had been before the attack.

Nothing much changed, honestly.

If there was one thing, though…

It was that Sunny had plenty of soul shards to turn into Memories now.

Standing up and summoning his clothes back, he looked around and noticed Fiend. The fearsome devil... seemed to be hiding from him behind the tree.

Sunny smiled.

"Come here, buddy."

Fiend hesitated for a few moments, then reluctantly walked over.

Sunny pointed to the gruesome corpses.

"Harvest the soul shards, then clean this mess up."

The devil's shoulders fell.

Sunny patted Fiend on one of these shoulders… well, he wanted to, but the bastard was too tall to do it comfortably. Plus, his body was covered in all kinds of sharp spikes. So, in the end, the gesture ended up being rather… reserved.

"Oh, and you can eat all these guys. Stuff yourself as much as you want! Now that your primary Attributes are set, you don't need to maintain a diet anymore..."

Ravenous sparks ignited in the depths of Fiend's fiery eyes.

Chapter-1346: Faltering Star

Fiend feasted on the corpses of the Drowned Outcasts with delight. The sight of the metallic devil gorging himself on the dead abominations was a bit gruesome, but mercifully swift. The bodies disappeared into the Shadow's incinerating maw as if they had never existed… before too long, the deck was clear once again.

'Where does all this meat even go…'

This time, the infernal ogre had not gained any new Attributes or Abilities. Which was an expected result — if the Scavengers were capable of attaining new powers from each creature they devoured, Sunny would have never survived the battle with the original Ravenous Fiend. It had to be a rare occurrence, especially now that the Shadow's main Attributes were set.

It did seem like he had grown a little bit stronger, though, just as the other Shadows did when absorbing a fragment.

Throwing a dubious glance at the satisfied devil, Sunny shook his head and commanded the glutton to go find a mop.

While Fiend was washing the blood off the deck, Sunny and Nephis briefly examined the ship and then gathered at the stern to divide the soul shards.

"Let's just each take half."

He looked at the small pile of shimmering crystals, calmly thinking about how to use them best. All of the shards were Transcendent… considering how nonchalant he was about this unimaginable treasure trove, remembering the awe they had felt when witnessing a pair of Transcendent soul shards back on the Forgotten Shore felt both amusing and nostalgic.

Nephis simply shook her head.

"I'll take a quarter. Your Shadows killed twice as many as I did, while you dealt with the depth dweller. That should be fair."

Sunny glanced at her, hesitating. She was right… out of the two of them, he had contributed much more to the victory. That only went to show how powerful he had grown, armed with a developed Aspect Legacy and three powerful Shadows.

It also meant that Nephis needed to catch up as soon as possible.

And yet…

Three quarters of their spoils amounted to seventeen Transcendent soul shards. If made into a Memory and fed to Nightmare, each would give him four shadow fragments. That meant that the black stallion would be most of the way to Ascension by the time Sunny finished weaving all these Memories.

While Nephis was still far away from becoming a Titan. Strategically, strengthening Nightmare first made more sense.

Sunny nodded.

"Alright."

Illuminated by the soft glimmer of the soul shards, Neph's face seemed even more reserved than usual. Was she pondering the matter of her faltering progress, as well?

With a sigh, Nephis took her share of the soul shards and methodically crushed them one after another, absorbing the streams of ethereal light. Then, she rose and said, her tone flat:

"We've wasted enough time here already. I'll go back to the steering oar."

He watched her walk into the runic circle with a complicated expression.

'Is she still feeling uncertain of herself after the Second Nightmare?

She has been… strangely mild ever since coming back. Selfishly, I like this Nephis more. But…'

But he also missed the version of Nephis that was like an uncompromising flame. A flame that burned with enough passion and unreasonable resolve to burn down the entire world.

Sunny shook his head slightly and gathered the rest of the soul shards.

'She is still the same. When the time comes, she'll burn brighter than the seven suns combined… I just hope that I won't be burned with the rest of this cursed tomb when that happens.'

Not entirely convinced, he stored the shards in the Covetous Coffer and went back to peering into the complexities of spellweaves.

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The Chain Breaker continued sailing downstream. In the next week, it was attacked several more times — for better or worse, by solitary Nightmare Creatures instead of groups like the Drowned Outcasts had been.

Sunny and Nephis dealt with the grotesque depth dwellers with some effort… but not too much effort. Apart from a few shallow wounds, the biggest hurdle they faced was removing the corpse of an especially large creature from the ram of the ship, which had impaled the abomination after a purposeful and violent collision.

None of the Nightmare Creatures were as powerful as the harrowing foes they had faced in the far reaches of the future. On the positive side, Sunny and Nephis were alive. On the negative side, they had not been able to salvage as many soul shards as they had after the first attack.

Sunny didn't really mind. His time was divided between studying the weave of Ananke's Mantle and concocting a tentative plan for altering the Dawn Shard. At the same time, he was creating Memories from the shards in his possession — that last task was moving along slowly, since it took him roughly a whole day to weave one.

That pace was only possible because his reserves of essence were fully restored each dawn and dusk thanks to the Crown of Twilight. Still, by the end of the week, Nightmare had absorbed twenty-eight shadow fragments, bringing the counter to [229/300].

Sunny still had enough soul shards to create ten rudimentary Transcendent Memories, each equivalent to four fragments. If nothing went wrong, the counter would reach [269/300] in ten days. His loyal steed's Ascension was drawing close.

By the end of the week, he felt ready to attempt modifying the Dawn Shard. However, because of how important that endeavor was to the conquest of the Third Nightmare, Sunny decided to go over everything he had learned and envisioned a few more times.

Putting the Crown of Dawn away and dismissing the shadow hands, he leaned against the side of the ketch and closed his eyes.

'I've created a sufficient length of essence thread. I've studied the spellweave of the Dawn Shard extensively. I compared the structure of the pattern surrounding the nexus with all the other Memories I possess. I've grown accustomed to weaving with six hands…'

He spent two days meditating on his plans and mentally going over everything that could go wrong.

…Finally, just before dawn of the third day, Sunny opened his eyes and manifested four shadow arms once again.

'It's time to begin.'

Chapter-1347: Trial of Skill

The hypnotizing tapestry of the spellweave stretched in the darkness in front of him. Countless threads of ethereal light intertwined in a beautiful, but seemingly chaotic pattern, centered around a radiant nexus.

There had been a time when these patterns were a complete mystery to Sunny. But although they still remained mystifying and nebulous, he could discern an elegant underlying structure to their dazzling, dizzying arrays now.

He could also feel the purpose of various elements of the weave more clearly.

The spellweave of the Dawn Shard was not the most complex he had ever seen… but it was more complex than most. Even after isolating the rudimentary enchantments that all Memories possessed and the special properties shared by Shard Memories, the remaining expanse of ethereal strings was byzantine and daunting.

Luckily, his goal was not to recreate the weave from scratch. He also did not intend to alter its function… only its capacity and resilience.

As well as transplanting a new, much more potent nexus than the existing one.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer and produced a large, shining crystal from within it. When put together, the band of bright metal and the Supreme soul shard he had harvested from the guts of the Black Turtle looked comical — the soul shard was much larger than the Crown of Dawn, yet it was supposed to become encompassed by it.

But that was not an obstacle. Weaves did not exist in the physical sense, anyway. Just like souls, they inhabited an entirely different

plane of existence.

Sunny pulled on the invisible thread of shadow essence. At the same time, a needle that shone with a faint golden glow appeared in one of his hands.

He took a deep breath.

'Steady…'

The process had to be steady. But it couldn't be slow — Sunny would have to remove the original nexus first before transplanting a new one. The moment it was removed, the weave was going to start falling apart. So, he had to tie as many of the most important threads back, fast, and then bring the rest back even faster.

He had spent years learning sorcery and two weeks restlessly preparing for this moment… but the outcome was going to be decided in less than ten minutes. If Sunny succeeded, the cohort would acquire a powerful tool to help them survive the Nightmare. If he failed…

The Dawn Shard would be destroyed, and he would have to explain himself to one hell of an angry Changing Star.

'She probably won't kill me... right? But just in case, I'd better not fail.'

"Of course you will. When have you ever not failed?"

The Sin of Solace was observing the process with a disdainful expression. Sunny was concentrating on the task so much that he had lowered his guard… as a result, the hurtful remark actually cut, for once.

Well, to be honest, they always cut a little. But this time, he felt bitter anger swell in his chest.

'Calm down!'

Throwing a dark look at the grinning apparition, Sunny wrapped all five shadows around himself and summoned the Crown of Twilight.

…As the first ray of sunshine burst from the horizon, he took a deep breath, and thrust one of his shadow hands into the ethereal tapestry of the spellweave. His clawed fingers wrapped themselves around the shining nexus… and then crushed it, destroying the anchor of the countless threads.

'I wonder how anyone could have been a weaver before me…'

Sunny was more or less certain that the very ability to not only see, but also touch the ethereal strings was granted to him by Bone Weave. His eyes had been altered by consuming a drop of Weaver's blood, while his fingers had been altered by swallowing the alabaster phalanx of the Demon of Fate. On the surface, the alteration simply made them more sensitive…

But he felt that it went much deeper than that.

Who knew? Maybe he would be able to caress the strings of fate itself one day...

Before the radiant weave could fully fall apart, his other hand placed the Supreme soul shard in its center. The one that had crushed the original nexus was already retreating, catching the most important thread as it did. Three more hands flashed forward, doing the same.

The last hand — his left human hand — was the most important, since it held Weaver's needle. All the rest were meant to stall the deterioration of the weave, but it was meant to actually mend the damage.

Threading the first ethereal string into the radiant needle, Sunny connected it to the nexus. Then, another… and another…

'Faster!'

Five of his hands danced, manipulating the dying weave into following their will. Holding it from crumbling and pulling it back from the verge of collapse. At the precise moment when the new nexus became connected to enough strings to hold it in place, the sixth joined them.

'...What madness made me think that having only five fingers is

enough?! Damnation! I should have learned to have more!'

Time seemed to have slowed down. Sunny felt the same rush of adrenaline he did during furious battles — his perception subtly changed, turning the world stark and clear. Golden sparks glimmered in the depths of his dark eyes.

For a few moments, everything was in a fragile balance. One wrong move, one slightest mistake, and the weave would have reached the point of no return. But Sunny did not make any mistakes. He performed every movement flawlessly, focused to such a degree that all his senses except sight and the tactile feeling of intangible threads sliding through his fingers disappeared.

Finally, after something that felt both like a second and an eternity, that moment of fragility passed. The main structure of the weave had been connected to the new nexus, ensuring its stability.

'Good…'

As Sunny's hands continued to tie the few last threads to the shining ember, his mind already wandered to the next task.

The first step of the alteration had been completed, but the result was still uncertain. The next stage was going to decide whether he would succeed or not — and while it gave him more leeway, it was no less difficult.

Chapter-1348: Sorcerer Supreme

Now that a Supreme soul shard replaced the original nexus of the spellweave, the powerful energy contained within it flowed into the radiant tapestry. The ethereal threads shone much brighter, reinforced by their own enchantment. Most of them held… but some of the more delicate patterns started to glow too intensely, as if a moment away from catching on fire and dissipating into blinding light.

He had to reinforce these sections of the weave, and do it in a way that did not contradict the intricate patterns.

Threading a string of shadow essence into Weaver's Needle, he held himself back from hurrying too much, and started to weave new patterns — these ones black and lightless — on top and through the radiant ones.

The needle worked in the most pressing areas of the weave, while his other hands tackled less critical points. No matter how nimble his fingers were, he still couldn't weave as fast without a proper tool — the reverse effect of his unique ability to touch the ethereal strings was that they were sharper than any sword could ever be, and were thus capable of cutting his flesh without any effort.

Losing a finger was as easy as applying the slightly wrong amount of pressure or missing the mark by a hair's breadth.

That said… while his own fingers were indispensable, those of the shadow hands could be easily sacrificed. They weren't just as responsive as the real ones, but the fact that one or two could be lost with no consequence made up for the fact.

'Ouch.'

No matter how careful Sunny was, the dire need to move fast was

bound to cause him some pain. A thin cut appeared on his right thumb, swelling with blood. Luckily, no drop of it fell into the weave to disturb its delicate equilibrium — his blood was tenacious, after all, and knew how to stay inside his body. Most of the time.

The shadow hands were faring worse. By the time Sunny put out the most dangerous fires, they were utterly shredded. He was barely keeping the wounded shadows from dissipating back into intangible forms, and had even been forced to dismiss one of the arms and create an entirely new one on the fly.

Nevertheless… it felt like he was past the most dangerous part.

A shaky breath escaped from Sunny's lips, and a drop of sweat fell from his forehead onto the wooden deck.

Without allowing himself to relax, he froze for a split second, gazing at the entirety of the weave.

'The nexus is holding. There and there… the shadow strings are lessening the burden on the original ones just as planned… that area is a bit frayed, I need to reinforce it more… no, not more, better… those areas, though, looked fine at the start, but are starting to worry me now…'

Calming his wildly beating heart, he resumed his work. Now, Sunny moved at a less breakneck pace, but was more methodical in his approach.

'Good, good… it's all coming together.'

It was a wonderful feeling. The collapsing weave had struggled against his attempts to save it at first, to the point that he felt like three critical problems appeared for each one he fixed. The more he repaired and reinforced it, though, the more it felt like the weave was assisting him.

The ethereal tapestry was starting to look elegant once again. The radiant threads and the lightless ones intertwined in a beautiful harmony. Both were being strengthened by the enchantment of the Dawn Shard and strengthening each other at the same time.

A feeling of wondrous harmony permeated the intricate spellweave. Its nexus was replaced, and its pattern was invaded by countless new threads, all of them dark and ghostly. But, nevertheless, it was resembling… a different, but natural version of itself, more and more.

…Continuing his meticulous work, Sunny threw a brief glance at the Sin of Solace.

"Hey, you."

The sword wraith raised an eyebrow.

"Hey yourself, fool."

Sunny was already looking back at the weave, concetrating on finishing the alteration, but the corner of his mouth rose in a small, vindictive smile.

"Go drown yourself in the river, you insufferable wretch. Weren't you endlessly going on about how I would inevitably fail? Well, did I? Who's the fool now, huh?!"

At that moment, he grinned and abruptly lowered all six of his hands, then froze, staring intently at the bond of bright metal laying on the deck in front of him.

His work was done. The alteration had been finished.

Sunny took a deep breath…

And as he did, the Spell whispered into his ear:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

His eyes widened.

His hands twitched.

'Ho…'

Before the shock could even register in his mind, the Spell spoke once more:

[You have received a Supreme Memory, Crown of Dawn.]

'...w?!'

Sunny remained frozen for a few moments, then slumped against the side of the ketch. An infuriating growl escaped from his lips:

"What?! What the hell was that?! Are you trying to give me a heart attack, you damned Spell?! Think before you speak, damn it!"

…The Spell did not answer.

Perhaps for the better.

After calming down a little, Sunny dismissed the shadow arms and picked up the Crown of Dawn from the deck. His hands were trembling slightly.

The eastern horizon was already painted lilac by the rising suns.

Looking at the Memory he had altered with burning eyes, he lingered for a while, and then said tiredly:

"So, your name actually changed to the Crown of Dawn. Ah... how fitting."

Before, that had simply been what they called the Dawn Shard, the Shard Memory of the first Lord of the Bright Castle. But it seemed that the Spell decided that the alteration he had performed was significant enough to warrant a new name for the newly elevated Memory.

Was he mistaken, or had the single gemstone adorning the austere band of metal become brighter?

Enjoying the view of the bright gem, Sunny inhaled deeply and summoned the runes.

...The runes read:

Memory: Crown of Dawn.

Memory Rank: Supreme.

Chapter-1349: Crowning Achievement

Sunny remained motionless for a while, looking at the string of shimmering runes. A sense of profound relief and exhilaration washed over him. He suddenly felt refreshed and invigorated, as if his fatigue had receded a little, his mind clearing.

…No, not suddenly. Touching the smooth silk of the Shroud of Dusk, Sunny belatedly realized that it was already being augmented by the passive enchantment of the empowered Crown of Dawn.

'It's working.'

He closed his eyes for a moment, then took a look at the rest of the runes describing the band of bright metal. They were the same as before — only the Rank of the Memory had changed.

Sunny had expected that. In fact, anything else would have been a cause for concern. The goal of the alteration was to strengthen the existing enchantment, after all, not change it.

The Crown of Dawn would still be able to enhance all Memories in a large area around it, with no limit to their number. It was just that the augmentation it provided had become much more potent.

Most miraculous of all, that enchantment somehow remained a passive one.

His eyes gleamed darkly.

'I think…'

Armed with that power, the cohort would be able to challenge enemies far beyond their own level of prowess. Which meant that

they would have a much higher chance of conquering the Nightmare and returning to the waking world alive.

Just like they had conquered the Forgotten Shore and returned from its unforgiving expanse alive.

He smiled, then dismissed the Crown of Dawn and rose.

Heading to the stern of the ship, Sunny tried to contain his emotions. His face remained neutral, with only a faint smile playing on his lips.

Soon, he saw Nephis. She threw a glance at him with the same calm expression she usually wore, then asked evenly:

"What was the shouting about?"

Sunny stumbled.

'Right… I did curse the Spell out, didn't I?'

In hindsight, that was probably not wise. He wouldn't put it past the damn thing to know how to hold a grudge… the descriptions it made of him were already vaguely snide, so Sunny shuddered at the thought of what the next one was going to say.

'Whatever. That will happen later… right now, though…'

Walking over to Nephis, he shrugged.

"Oh, it's nothing really. I just got a bit emotional and let the Spell have it. Why, have you never yelled at the Spell?"

She stared at him dubiously.

"...Can't say that I have."

Sunny coughed.

"Well, anyway. Give me your hand."

Without waiting for permission, he grabbed it, lingered for a moment, and sent the Crown of Dawn from his soul into hers.

Nephis turned her head slightly and stared into the distance — or rather, it seemed like she did. In truth, she must have been reading the runes.

"Oh. It's name has changed…"

Then, she suddenly froze. Sunny studied her face with rapt attention, registering every minute change. Sadly, Changing Star was not the kind of person to openly show emotions… nevertheless, he noticed her pupils widening slightly, white sparks igniting in their depths.

"...huh?"

He laughed.

"You finally noticed its Rank, didn't you? Well, well, well… no need to praise me too much! I just took the soul shard we scavenged from inside the Black Turtle and transplanted it into the Dawn Shard, strengthening the weave of its enchantment to withstand the burden of channeling supreme power in the process. That's all."

Sunny looked down modestly.

"I am totally not a peerless genius among peerless geniuses. You absolutely don't need to worship the ground I walk on… there's no ground in the Tomb of Ariel, anyway…"

Nephis suddenly gripped his hand tightly and pierced him with a burning gaze.

"Sunny… you… you can elevate Memories to higher Ranks now?"

He smiled, enjoying the intensity of her reaction.

However, his smile dimmed a little bit the next moment.

"Well… yes. But also no."

Sunny sighed.

"The case of the Crown of Dawn is unique, because it possesses an enchantment that enhances itself. That is why I was able to outfit it

with a Supreme soul shard and elevate its power by two whole Ranks. For other Memories… I doubt that they'll endure such a significant alteration. Elevating them by one Rank, though? That should be possible for some, I think, if time-consuming."

Nephis stared at him in silence. He hesitated for a few moments, then said in a somewhat stifled tone:

"But, Neph… uh..."

She raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Yes?"

Sunny coughed.

"Can you let go of my hand? You're sort of crushing it…"

Nephis looked down, blinked a couple of times, then hurriedly released her grip.

"Oh!"

Sunny shook his hand in the air. It didn't really hurt, but he had suddenly become painfully aware of how close they were standing. His face felt hot.

Letting out an awkward chuckle, he shook his head and pointed to her head.

"Now, summon that thing. I came here right away, so I don't even know how powerful exactly it has become."

Nephis nodded, and a whirlwind of radiant sparks appeared around her. Soon, a band of bright metal manifested itself from thin air, its single gem glistening in the light of the rising suns.

'Let's do this…'

For the next half an hour, Sunny and Nephis were engrossed in testing the effects of the Crown of Dawn on their Memories. The results went beyond his wildest imagination.

Sunny had thought that his makeshift alteration would cause a loss of potential, resulting in a Memory that was a Supreme one in name, but not in power. And there was some loss, inevitably… but so little that it could almost be disregarded.

Before, the Dawn Shard had been capable of elevating the power of Awakened Memories to resemble that of Ascended ones. It had also been capable of providing a significant boost to Ascended Memories, and a slight one to Transcendent ones.

The meaning of "power" in this context was an elusive one. The augmentation did not only empower the enchantments of the enhanced Memories, but also the quality of the Memories themselves. Swords would become sharper, armor would become more durable…

There was also something else at play — the intangible, mystical quality that made magical materials different from the mundane ones was enhanced, as well, which was why the Dreamers of the Dark City had been able to harm and slay enemies of higher Ranks with their Awakened weapons.

The Crown of Dawn functioned in a similar fashion to its predecessor. However, it's augmentation was much more powerful.

An average Awakened weapon was elevated to the level of a peak Ascended one, while the most powerful Awakened weapons could almost reach the realm of Transcendence. Ascended Memories were elevated to the level of Transcendent ones.

While Transcendent Memories…

Sunny grew still, peering into the depths of the Sin of Solace. Under his gaze, the weave of the jade jian shone with blinding brilliance.

'It's not that different from the Crown of Twilight. It is like a Supreme weapon…'

He threw a glance at the silent apparition that stood a few steps away, wearing a somber expression… and suddenly felt a pang of apprehension.

Dismissing the Sin of Solace, Sunny hesitated for a few moments,

then finally took the Crown of Twilight off his head and studied it.

It was benefiting from being in the presence of the Crown of Dawn, as well. The boost was not as striking as it was for the Memories of lesser Ranks, but still tangible.

Nephis, meanwhile, was holding her longsword with a hard-to-read expression.

Suddenly, though, her beautiful face was illuminated by a radiant smile.

"Sunny… this is amazing! With this, we can…"

She stumbled over her words, not knowing what to say.

…Enjoying the rare sight of her smiling brightly, he nodded and looked in the direction where the current was pulling them.

His own smile grew a little cold.

"Yes."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"We can slaughter them all."

The winds filled the sails of the Chain Breaker, pushing it forward.

The past awaited.

Chapter-1350: Familiar Pattern

By the time Sunny had finished the alteration of the Dawn Shard, they were not that far away from Fallen Grace. Neither he nor Nephis knew the exact distance they had to traverse to find the last city of the sybils, but the navigation tools Ananke had left them pointed to its approach.

Fallen Grace was situated in the western reaches of the Great River, where the sky was almost always painted crimson by the setting sun. As the Chain Breaker sailed deeper into the past, it was also leaving behind the pure light of day.

Gradually, the color of the sky above their heads changed. From vibrant azure to breathtaking magenta, and finally to the bloodred blaze of perpetual sunset.

It was like sailing into a sea of blood.

Sunny stared at the burning sky, awed by its fiery beauty… and its ominous dread.

'That's… not concerning at all.'

Why would the sybils build one of their cities in such a darkly beautiful, but sinister place? Surely, living in the warm sunlight of the central region of the Great River would have been much more pleasant.

Shaking his head, he returned to the shade of the sacred tree and sat down, resting his back against its white bark. He had just finished weaving another Memory for Nightmare, and was not in the mood to start on the next one just yet.

His study of the spellweave of Ananke's Mantle had also been producing fewer and fewer results. It would never stop being useful

to him as a learning tool, but Sunny felt like he was nearing a dead end. He would need to gain more skill as a weaver before looking to the nebulous mantle for more lessons.

So, what else was there to do?

Feeling restless, he summoned the Estuary Key out of habit. Staring into the weave of the mysterious Memory had become like a ritual by now. Even though Sunny could not understand anything about it, the process itself was calming.

However… he had not taken a glance at the Key since before attempting the alteration of the Crown of Dawn. Who knew? Maybe passing such an important milestone on his path to becoming a proper sorcerer would change something…

"Are you playing with our favorite toy again? Why don't you toss it overboard and be done with it?"

The sword wraith stared at him disdainfully from the shadows of the tree.

Not paying the apparition any attention, Sunny held up the jagged black stone and peered into its weathered surface.

The inconceivable weave of ghostly strings was as unattainable as ever. He studied its dark tapestry, following the twists and turns of the black threads… like he had done a hundred times before.

'What a disappointment… I still can't even start to unravel its mysteries.'

Among all the odd things Sunny had seen and faced in the Nightmare, the Estuary Key was perhaps the most bizarre. He still had no idea how this Supreme Memory of the Sixth Tier had ended up in his Soul Sea, or what it was supposed to do.

…However, after spending countless hours staring at the staggering weave of ghostly strings, he had gained a vague, tentative feeling about it.

Sunny was mostly confident that the single, passive enchantment of

the Estuary Key had two distinct effects. He did not know what these effects were, but felt that one was directed outward, while the other was directed inward, affecting the black stone itself… in some manner.

The latter was also much more vast and potent than the former. It was unusual that a Memory of the Sixth Tier only possessed a single enchantment — since it did, that enchantment had to be a powerful one. And most of that power went into ensuring the function of the inward effect.

'Maybe that's why I wasn't able to discern what exactly the enchantment does. It's only affecting the Estuary Key itself.'

Perhaps it was an enchantment that teleported the strange Memory into the souls of unsuspecting Awakened without their consent?

As Sunny was feeling amused with this theory…

His gaze suddenly caught on a minuscule part of the inconceivable weave. The lightless tapestry was vast enough that he might have never seen it before… or if he had, Sunny had not paid it any attention.

But now, he froze, staring at the inconspicuous pattern.

'What… what the hell is that?'

The pattern… looked familiar. Sunny had definitely seen it before, somewhere else. Recently.

Which was not that strange in and of itself — the Estuary Key was a Memory, after all, and as such, it shared many small parts of its weave with all other Memories — the patterns that created the rudimentary enchantments like the ability to be summoned and dismissed, repair itself, and so on.

However, Sunny knew these patterns by heart. He had woven them from scratch many times, after all. And this one… this one was not one of them.

'Where have I seen it?'

The complicated array of ghostly strings had a certain unique structure to it, which was different from the rest of the spellweave. He recognized its nature after a moment of contemplation — patterns like these were rare, but present in every Memory. It was how runes were expressed through essence strings.

Both the runic sorcery and shaping were based on True Names — one etching them through a written language, the other invoking them directly. However, weaving was different. It did not rely on words to create enchantments.

That said, there was still a place for words in a spellweave, and therefore for the runes inscribing them. These runes, translated from the corresponding string patterns, expressed the name of the Memory, its description, and the True Name of its master — if the master possessed one.

The problem was… that Sunny had long identified the patterns that inscribed the name and description of the Estuary Key, as well as his own True Name. And this particular pattern had nothing to do with them.

Why were there additional runes hidden in the weave of the black stone?

And why did the pattern of essence strings describing these runes look so familiar?

Sunny leaned forward with a frown and concentrated, trying to decipher the meaning of the pattern. It was not at all difficult… in fact, it was even easier than usual, as if he had read this exact pattern of essence strings many times before.

His pupils narrowed.

"Sin… of…"

Sunny suddenly straightened, a cold shiver running down his spine.

Standing in the shadows, the apparition yawned and covered his mouth with a hand.

"What's the matter?"

'...Solace.'

The Sin of Solace.

Written in ghostly strings, the name of his cursed sword — and the sword wraith born from its curse — was meticulously woven into the enchantment of the Estuary Key.

Chapter-1351: Beware of Future Versions of Yourself Bearing Gifts

The Sin of Solace.

These words were clearly a part of the ghostly spellweave of the Estuary Key. Sunny stared at them intently, feeling a strange mix of confusion, curiosity… and dread.

What the hell was the meaning of this?

Shifting slightly, he looked at the sword wraith. The apparition stood in the shadows, wearing a bored and resentful expression. Sunny had grown so accustomed to the company of the Sin of Solace — first in the form of a disembodied voice, then of a vague figure, and finally of a perfect reflection of himself — that he rarely paid it much attention these days.

But the sword wraith was not at all benevolent or harmless. In fact, he was a sinister and insidious being, spawned from the whisper of a fearsome daemon and meant to drive the wielder of the sword mad.

The fact that Sunny still had his sanity intact… or rather, somewhat intact… was only due to his extraordinary mental resilience and resistance to mind attacks. Most humans would have already been turned into raving lunatics by the jade jian.

Sunny, though? Apart from looking like a madman from time to time due to an outwardly strange habit of talking to himself, he only found the presence of the Sin of Solace frustrating, nothing more.

'...Is there more to this damned curse?'

He knew that the apparition would never give an honest answer, but nevertheless asked:

"There's no reason your name would be etched into the weave of the Estuary Key, is there?"

The sword wraith gave him a disdainful look.

"I don't know. Maybe there is… you're the great sorcerer, so you tell me."

Sunny took a deep breath.

"You are keeping a lot of secrets these days, huh? Makes me wonder if I should just feed you to Nightmare. Better safe than sorry, that is what they say."

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Go ahead, get rid of your most powerful offensive Memory. Why not? You're going to die in this Nightmare, anyway. In fact, I encourage you to destroy me! Oh… do you think that I want to be here? Gods, no."

He grinned.

"Ah, but there's a problem. Are you sure that destroying the sword will get rid of me? It might, it might… but then again, maybe it won't. Maybe the damage to your mind has already been done, and we are stuck together for the rest of your short, distasteful, pitiful life. What a cruel fate!"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

Indeed… he couldn't afford to destroy the Sin of Solace, and neither was he certain that doing so would banish the apparition. They were truly stuck with each other, at least for now.

'And I won't get any information out of the bastard, either.'

So… there were only two ways to solve the mystery of the Estuary Key and its connection to the Sin of Solace. One was to find the great

sorcerer who had created the ominous Memory. The other was to deduce the truth, somehow.

Sunny looked away with a somber expression.

'Now that I know that the Sin of Solace has something to do with the Estuary Key…'

He suddenly felt cold.

After entering the Nightmare and discovering that he had somehow come into possession of a Supreme Memory, Sunny made several theories about how it could have ended up in his Soul Sea. One of them was that the Soul Serpent had slain a Great Nightmare Creature out there in the real world…

The other was that it was Sunny himself who had created the Estuary Key far in the future, but somehow received it in the present due to the strange nature of the Great River.

And now that he had learned certain facts and knew that the name of the Sin of Solace was etched into the weave of the unexplainable Memory, a chilling suspicion was getting harder and harder to deny.

Looking down, Sunny slowly clenched his fists.

'It was him… the Mad Prince. He must be the one who created the Estuary Key.'

Simply thinking these words made him shudder.

But it was just too compelling of a theory to discard. Sunny had suspected that the mysterious Memory had been created by a future version of himself. He also suspected that the Mad Prince was one of his possible futures.

So, wouldn't it be logical to assume that the future version of himself who had created the Estuary Key was the Mad Prince?

The name of the Sin of Solace etched into the weave, the ghostly strings of shadow essence, the unexplainable nature of the Key… and the strange words describing it.

The answer is oblivion.

'It had to have been him.'

How many weavers were there who could create threads out of shadow essence?

Sunny was certain of it.

Then… what exactly did it mean?

'If that abomination really created the Estuary Key…'

Did it prove that Sunny was really inhabiting the body of one of the Six Plagues? That would certainly make things easier for the cohort. One adversary was already gone, after all. And it didn't even have to be just one… what if each of the members of the cohort had been sent into the bodies of these powerful Defiled?

…Actually, that was a chilling thought. Because while it would really be wonderful to not have to deal with the Six Plagues, it also meant that the other members had been sent directly to the heart of the Defilement, the city of Verge. The Mad Prince was the only one of the Defiled champions who had traveled into the far reaches of the future, after all, from what Sunny knew.

Surely, the Nightmare Spell wouldn't have been so unjust in setting up its trial.

Still, if Sunny had indeed taken the role of the abomination from the future… he could also tentatively explain the sudden change of the Sin of Solace.

Why had the sword wraith suddenly grown to look so vivid and real at the start of the Nightmare, almost indistinguishable from the real thing?

Was it, perhaps, because Sunny had actually inherited not one, but two things from the Mad Prince? One was the Estuary Key… while the other was the Sin of Solace.

What if the sword wraith that had greeted him in the Nightmare

came from the future, just like the Estuary Key? What if the Sin of Solace had been by his side all the way to becoming Defiled and then spending gods knew how much time haunting the Great River? Hundreds of years, at least, judging by how superior the madman's weaving was to Sunny's own.

...And had been then passed down to the younger version of its corrupted master through some bizarre anomaly or dark scheme.

The apparition had let it slip that he knew the Mad Prince by interfering with the dream where the abomination's vestige showed up. Was that why?

Sunny scowled.

Suddenly, the idea of feeding the jade sword to his Shadows did not seem so crazy anymore.

'I'll wait and see.'

Sunny glared at the Sin of Solace, distrustful and wary.

Glaring at him back, the sword wraith grinned.

"Look at you, figuring things out. Ah… there's really no sight more comical than a fool who thinks that he's smart. Wouldn't you agree?"

Sunny grimaced and remained silent. Was that a confirmation? Or simple mockery?

He gritted his teeth, knowing that there was no way to tell.

Chapter-1352: Nearing the Edge

In the end, Sunny failed to get the wraith to say anything informative. Just as usual, all the answers he received were either vague and misleading, or outright insults that had nothing to do with the question.

Later, in a somber mood, he left the shadow of the sacred tree and walked around the ship, examining its state. Sunny felt odd in light of the things he had learned and suspected to be true.

'Ah, it's infuriating.'

He seemed to have stumbled on the truth, or rather, on a big chunk of the truth. However, there were still plenty of missing parts, and those were the parts that contained the most important answers.

His mind was spinning, coming up with one baseless theory after another. Sunny was unable to glean the true meaning of it all, but what he did manage to do was completely exhaust himself mentally.

Eventually, feeling foul, he threw the manic desire to get to the bottom of things right here and now out of his head and settled near the ketch to start weaving another Memory for Nightmare.

The fiery sunset lasted for the entirety of the day, and was then replaced by the ghostly radiance of the night. Here in the western reaches of the Great River, even the opalescence of the water was different. It was shifting between deep carmine, vibrant crimson, and rich maroon… as if they were truly sailing on a river of blood.

The nights they had witnessed before were dreamlike, but this one… this one was like a scene from a darkly beautiful nightmare.

Sunny and Nephis had not slept for a single moment, too wary to close their eyes.

In the morning, the impenetrable darkness of the night was once again replaced by a blazing sunset. It seemed like one of the seven suns was always within reach, drowning in the currents of time.

The further west they sailed, the dimmer the light became. Eventually, they were surrounded by a fiery dusk.

"Sunny… isn't the current strange?"

Neph's voice sounded tense.

Currently, he was holding the steering oar, while she was leaning over the railing nearby.

Confused, Sunny sent one of his shadows to take a look overboard. It took him a long time to understand what had alarmed Nephis.

'Strange.'

The current of the Great River… was changing.

Ever since they entered the Tomb of Ariel, it had always flowed in the same direction. But now, it seemed as if the currents were twisting, not only carrying the Chain Breaker forward, but also slightly pulling it to the side.

In the direction of the setting sun.

He gripped the oar tighter.

"We must be nearing the edge."

The Great River was vast and flowed endlessly… but it was not limitless. That was one of the first things they had asked Ananke, hoping that there was a shore somewhere in this inhospitable world.

…But there was no shore.

Instead, the Great River was limited from west and east — from dusk and dawn, as the River People called these directions — by a bottomless dark abyss. It was as though the river flowed through nothing, suspended in the void by the power of the Demon of Dread.

And so, there was an edge instead of the shore. A colossal and unceasing waterfall where the waters of time spilled into the abyss and disappeared into the boundless darkness. Sailing close to the edge was tantamount to suicide.

They had not reached the truly dangerous waters yet — otherwise, the currents would have already been pulling the Chain Breaker toward the abyss with ferocious force — but the subtle change in the direction of where the water flowed indicated that the edge was already not too far away.

Which was good news.

Because it meant that they were even closer to Fallen Grace.

…And Dusk, the last sybil of the Estuary.

Sunny inhaled deeply.

"Check the navigation tools again. It would be really awful if we overshoot Fallen Grace and end up deeper into the past than intended."

That would have been bad, indeed, considering that there was no one except Defiled further downstream than the last human city.

If the last human city was still standing…

Sunny frowned, remembering the time storm. They did not really know how long they had spent fighting against its rage, and especially how long they had spent in the eerily tranquil eye of the roving cataclysm, trying their hardest not to look at the water.

Who knew? Fallen Grace might have been consumed by the Defilement, already.

Even if it wasn't, there was no telling whether Dusk was friend or foe, let alone whether she was the one who had sent Ananke the message to find them through the dreams.

They had to be ready for battle.

While Nephis was trying to determine their location with the help of the navigation tools, Sunny silently gave his Shadows a series of commands.

Standing at the bow of the graceful ship, Saint released her darkness with indifferent poise. Nightmare stirred in the shadows, his crimson eyes igniting with dangerous light. Fiend rose from the deck, infernal flames burning behind the black faceplate of his fearsome helmet.

Soon, Nephis put the tools away and looked downstream.

"Everything seems fine. We should be very near… of course, the city might have migrated in any direction by now. Still, it couldn't have moved far without sacrificing its entire population of Riverborn."

Sunny nodded slowly. Indeed… although the floating cities of the Great River civilization could theoretically travel as far as their inhabitants wished, in reality, they were bound in place by the lifespans of the Riverborn. Migrations happened over the span of generations, not months or years.

"Replace me at the oar."

Nephis silently stepped into the runic circle, freeing Sunny. Right now, he was a more efficient fighter between the two of them…

More importantly, he had no idea how to berth a ship. If the people of Fallen Grace were indeed friendly… it would be really embarrassing to crash into their pier first thing after arriving.

'Yeah... I'll handle the fighting, if it comes to that.'

Sunny secretly looked around, checking what the Sin of Solace was doing. Making sure that the sword wraith wasn't up to no good, he let out a mental sigh of relief and extended his shadow sense as far as he could.

After that, all they could do was wait.

An hour passed in tense silence, then another. The drag of the abyss was still mild, but it was slowly growing faster. Surrounded by eternal sunset, Sunny found it hard to measure time.

The Chain Breaker sailed through crimson dusk. The waters of the Great River reflected the burning sky, and seemed to be engulfed in flames themselves in turn.

Then, finally, Saint shifted and slightly turned her head.

…In the distance, Sunny saw a spark of light shining above the horizon. Somewhere out there, a white flame was burning at the top of a tall lighthouse.

They had found the last human city in the Tomb of Ariel, it seemed…

After months of wandering the perilous expanse of the Tomb of Ariel, they had reached Fallen Grace.

Chapter-1353: Tattered Sails

There had been a time when Cronos possessed a youthful body and an even younger soul. His soul was still young, all things considered, but his body had turned decrepit and frail. It was full of aches, felt stiff in the mornings, and had to be handled with care.

Still, there were pleasant things about being old, as well.

Cronos had burned with all kinds of hopes and desires when he was young, but now that he was in his twilight years, life was calm and peaceful. Or rather, his feelings about life were calm and peaceful… or was it one and the same? Since one thing he didn't possess was the actual wisdom of old age, it was hard to say.

One thing was for certain — not having to worry about the future, he had much more time to enjoy the trivial delights of life. Like the warmth of his cot, the companionship of his friends and neighbors, or the beauty of the world.

Since Cronos did not sleep much, old as his body was, he had developed the habit of walking to the piers at the break of day, to watch the suns rise from the water. Today, just like always, he left his home carrying a lantern and walked to the edges of the city. Despite the fact that the streets were still dark, there were many early risers just like him out and about.

Some greeted him with words, some with smiles.

Their faces were just as wrinkly as his, and their bodies were just as stiff as his. That also made being old feel less lonely.

Eventually, Cronos crossed a few rope bridges and reached the piers. Several people were already there, waiting in the darkness. Some of them he knew from his days in the House of Youth, some he had met after. Joining them, he extinguished the lantern, sat down, and

looked at the water.

They chatted as the night lived its last minutes.

Shrouded in darkness, the Great River glowed with a beautiful red radiance. Then, slowly, its light grew brighter. The chatter quieted down as the old men and women enjoyed the view of the flowing water.

Somewhere far away, the black veil covering the sky rippled. Hints of lilac and azure were mixed into its dark expanse. The River seemed to ignite, fiery colors spreading across its surface. Then, finally, the suns rose from the depths, painting the world in a million shades of scarlet. Reflected in the water, their light was like a spreading flame.

Cronos sighed lightly.

"It's a new day."

A cool breeze caressed their faces, and the world was at peace… or maybe it just seemed to be at peace. Of course, it was actually at war — but they did not have to worry about that today. Otherwise, the Lady would have already warned the warriors of the city to prepare for battle.

The group of old folks remained on the pier for a while, not in a hurry to leave. There was gossip to share and idle conversations to be had. As the youngest of the bunch, Cronos had not grown tired of hearing the same old stories over and over again yet, so he received a lot of attention.

He listened and laughed, feeling a comfortable bliss.

…But then, a note of confusion entered that bliss.

Still engrossed in a story told by an old woman who had left the House of Youth a few years before the rest of them fled, he glanced at the River and froze, stunned.

There was a black spot on the horizon.

It was a ship moving in the direction of Fallen Grace.

Cronos trembled slightly.

'A ship… but it's not time yet for the fishermen to return. Has something bad happened?'

Soon, the other old folks noticed the approaching vessel as well. The conversation died down, and all of them stared into the distance, somber and tense.

Then, their expressions changed.

The mysterious vessel had drawn close enough for them to discern a few details… its size, the color of its hull and sails, the strange shape of its mast…

Cronos was suddenly gripped with fear.

"It's… it's not..."

The vessel had a graceful silhouette, but looked indescribably menacing as it emerged from the crimson glow of dusk. Its hull was battered and covered in scars, while its tattered sails were like an ill omen. Much more importantly…

The ghostly ship was unfamiliar. It was unmistakably alien to their city and its fleet of fishing boats, all of which Cronos knew by heart.

He had never seen an unfamiliar ship arrive at Fallen Grace. They had received guests in the past, when his parents were young, but that time had long passed.

Because Fallen Grace was the last human city on the Great River.

"D—Defiled!"

Someone's yell broke the silence, sending the old folks reeling.

The Defiled did not have a habit of traversing the Great River on ships, but they were also sinister and unpredictable. The ominous ship might very well belong to the abominable monsters.

But if it did, why had the Lady not warned them of an approaching

attack? Why was the light burning at the top of her palace still white?

Icy dread grasped Cronos.

'Has… has the Lady succumbed? No, no… impossible!'

His irreverent thoughts were interrupted by a loud scream. The observers staggered back, horrified by a dark shadow that moved below the water.

Shocked, Cronos watched as the head of a colossal serpent rose from the waves near the approaching vessel. The beast's scales were onyx black, glistening with dark sanguine glow as they reflected the crimson light of dusk.

"A… a Corrupted!"

People of Fallen Grace had all heard legends of the Serpent King as young kids, so seeing a similar abomination rise from the depths was like watching their childhood fears come alive.

At that moment, the serpent's lightless eyes turned to the pier. Cronos felt his soul tremble, as if the creature was peering directly at him.

And then, something unexplainable happened.

The colossal body of the monstrous leviathan suddenly rippled, becoming vague and indistinct. Then, it dissipated into a tide of darkness.

Instead, a slender human figure appeared on the bow of the approaching ship.

The dark figure was contoured against the burning sky, its mantle moving slightly in the wind. It seemed to belong to a young man with porcelain skin and raven-black hair, his eyes as dark as night.

The same lightless gaze swept across the pier, and then the sails of the ominous ship lowered themselves, as if by magic.

Cronos took a shaky breath, staring at the ghostly vessel.

A strange thought appeared in his mind:

"Is... is this the end? Or a new beginning?"

Chapter-1354: By Grace of Dusk

With its tattered sails lowered, the ominous vessel slowed down, eventually coming to a semblance of a halt. It drifted on the waves a few hundred meters away from the pier, carried by nothing except the current. Cronos had managed to regain some composure by then. He briefly thought about running away, but decided against it.

His body was too old to run with any kind of significant speed, anyway. The watchers guarding the city must have noticed the ghostly ship and the terrifying onyx serpent, too — if the Lady had truly not known about their arrival, warriors would already be on their way.

For a few moments, everyone remained motionless — the old men and women gathered on the pier, and the dark figure standing on the bow of the graceful vessel, as well.

The current was slowly pulling the ship closer. It was only a matter of minutes before it reached the pier.

'This is… strangely exciting?'

Cronos should have been terrified, but he found himself awed and curious instead. All of them here in Fallen Grace lived with the knowledge that their lives would soon come to an end — death was like an old friend, not an odious enemy. The arrival of a mysterious ship, however, was a novelty.

How often did he get to experience something entirely unexpected?

He had never seen anything like it, and would most likely never get a chance to witness something as wondrous again. So, he waited for the moment when the hull of the ship touched the pier with bated breath.

…Eventually, the graceful vessel drew close enough for them to see every terrible scar and every burn mark covering its battered hull. It seemed like the battered ship had escaped the depths of hell and survived all kinds of untold disasters... what terrible battles had it endured? What harrowing creatures had clawed its hull, unable to break through?

...What kind of beings dwelled within it, who had been able to survive all these ordeals? Were they, perhaps, more harrowing than the creatures that had left their marks on the ancient hull?

Cronos and his fellows saw the deck of the ship, as well, stunned by the sight of a beautiful tree growing around the ship's main mast. That tree was vibrant and full of life, not at all like the grim vessel below it. It was much taller and robust than any tree growing in Fallen Grace.

'What is this craftsmanship…'

Cronos had never seen a vessel of such design, nor had he known of any ship builder who could have created it. The lines of the ghostly ship were elegant, but unfamiliar. The small details of its construction were unlike anything that the River People would have built… they were also entirely different from how the Twilight People had built things, back before they were wiped out by the Defiled.

The ghostly ship looked ancient and mysterious, like all things passed down from the Outsiders.

Suddenly, Cronos felt joyous excitement.

'Are… are these people…'

The ship smoothly approached the pier and halted just beside it, its bow softly touching the mooring berth. As the humans of Fallen Grace watched in stunned silence, four figures jumped from its deck onto the weathered wood.

There were two humans in front… if they were really humans, and not deities.

Cronos suddenly found it hard to breathe.

The first one was the slender young man wearing a dark mantle, his porcelain face drowning in the shadows. His lightless eyes were like two pools of unfathomable darkness, cold and piercing. There was a crown of black metal resting on his head, shaped to resemble a twisting serpent.

The other was a tall young woman with silver hair and calm grey eyes, wearing a white tunic. Her face was like that of a statue, beautiful and distant. She wore a crown, too, this one bright and adorned with a single radiant gem.

When she appeared, it was as though the light of the seven suns had grown a little brighter. Cronos felt something move in his heart, and for a moment, his soul was grasped by a deep and unexplainable longing.

The two were like night and day, mysterious and beautiful.

…The other two were like monsters.

One was a towering knight that seemed to have been carved from onyx, her graceful armor both intricate and fearsome. The other was like an ogre forged from black steel, with hungry flames burning in the depths of his ferocious eyes.

There was something hiding in the shadows, too. A dreadful presence that felt both elusive and terrifying.

Everyone stared at the strangers, feeling dread, awe, and wonder.

After a few moments of silence, the young man wearing the serpent crown took a step forward and spoke in a familiar language, his voice resounding across the pier:

"We have come from the far reaches of the future in search of Fallen Grace, the last bastion of the River People. We mean no harm… unless you do us harm. I am... "

At that moment, Cronos became sure of his suspicion.

'They are! They must be!'

With his heart beating wildly, he stepped forward and asked in a trembling voice:

"M—my Lord… you… are you the Children of Weaver?"

The young man glanced at him, making Cronos shiver under that piercing gaze of his. A hint of surprise appeared in the lightless eyes, but then disappeared, replaced by something that resembled… satisfaction.

"Indeed. We are Changing Star and Sunless, Children of Weaver. "

His words were like an explosion for the old men and women gathered on the pier. Their fear disappeared, and instead, bright smiles illuminated their wrinkly faces.

"Of course!"

"It's them!"

"Just like the Lady foretold!"

"Praise the Lady!"

Cronos couldn't keep the smile from appearing on his face, either.

'Ah, I must have gone senile… why haven't I realized sooner?'

He hesitated for a moment, then bowed deeply and spoke, trying to make his voice sound solemn instead of amazed and excited:

"It is our honor to meet you. We welcome you to Fallen Grace, esteemed guests."

Then, he straightened and added reverently:

"Lady Dusk has been awaiting you for a long, long time…"

Chapter-1355: Fallen Grace

'No… I'm definitely not imagining it. These people are weird!'

The citizens of Fallen Grace were indeed looking at Sunny funny. The frail old man in front of him was smiling with an odd mix of joy and terror, just like the rest of the elderly folks that had met them on the pier. They were simultaneously far too excited and far too scared, like a bunch of teenagers who met an idol for the first time.

He could vaguely understand why they would be delighted — it seemed that Dusk had already been waiting for Sunny and Nephis, after all. Which was potentially a piece of good news...

But where had the awe and terror come from?

'Uh… maybe I shouldn't have shown up as a serpent?'

Sunny had thought that the River People would be accustomed to seeing creatures of all kinds, but maybe he was wrong. Still… there was a strange incongruity between the age of these people and how animated their reactions were.

This whole city was strange.

When Sunny and Nephis had first seen it, both were tense and wary. They had not known what kind of welcome to expect, and kept their guard up.

Fallen Grace looked a lot like Weave, but also different. Painted by the crimson radiance of dusk, it floated on the waves, stretching as far as the eye could see. It was much larger than the forlorn city of the followers of Weaver, and also more developed, feeling like a place with much deeper roots.

There were more island-ships, most paved neatly with cobblestones

and carrying graceful, picturesque buildings. The islands were connected by rope bridges, with wide canals below. Slender gondolas with intricate patterns carved into their pale wood moved through them.

Unlike Weave, there were no windcatchers here. Instead, there were sails of vibrant scarlet fabric stretched between the taller buildings, making the city look like a grandiose flotilla. The buildings themselves were built from white stone and pale wood, with crimson accents added here and there to liven up their scenic facades.

Fallen Grace was like a flower of pure, immaculate white drifting between the ominous crimson sky and the blood-red waters of the Great River.

However… it was a wilting flower.

Although the beautiful buildings had been masterfully constructed, most of them were showing signs of deterioration. The newer ones did not seem nearly as picturesque, either. The rope bridges were frayed and poorly maintained. The scarlet sails might have looked magnificent once, but now their fabric had faded, its surface covered in patches and signs of makeshift repairs.

Most glaringly of all… the streets of the city were too desolate. From what Sunny could tell, half of the buildings had no inhabitants, standing abandoned and empty. That felt deeply wrong.

He had grown up in NQSC, after all. In a city surrounded by defensive barriers, space was deeply precious… and since there was not enough of it to go around, people like him were condemned to the outskirts. Even there, emptiness was not tolerated.

Plus, the only people in sight were these old men and women… where were the sailors? Where were the soldiers? Where were the Awakened?

Why was the Chain Breaker allowed to approach the city without being met by its guardians?

Sunny found the situation very strange.

'Well… at least they are not attacking us.'

That was a concern for Nephis and him, which was why he had dove into the water as a serpent.

He stared at the old man, trying to understand why the local seemed to be growing paler and paler with each passing moment. Then, mentally shaking his head, he sighed and said:

"That's good, then. We've been anticipating meeting Lady Dusk a great deal, too."

Maybe they would finally receive some answers from the last sybil of the Estuary.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then asked bluntly:

"Your city defenses seem awfully lacking. Where are the warriors? Why hasn't anyone prevented our ship from entering your waters?"

The old man let out a nervous chuckle.

"Oh… why would they? The Lady would have warned us if there was danger. Since she didn't, there must be no danger. So…"

He paused awkwardly and added:

"Please don't worry, though! Someone will arrive shortly to escort you, esteemed guests. I am sure of it."

Sunny and Nephis stared at the old man incredulously.

'Huh.'

So that was why. Fallen Grace was ruled by an oracle… and therefore, its citizens lived by a completely different set of rules. Why post watchmen if any attack could be foretold in advance? It was something like that, perhaps.

He wasn't sure he could really comprehend how drastic of a change such a life would be.

'Makes one wonder how the cities of the sybils fell, despite it all…'

Perhaps it was precisely because these people relied on the sybils so much... and the sybils, no matter how potent their prophetic powers were, could not have been omniscient. Especially when there were more sinister powers at play.

As Sunny was pondering these matters, there was a small commotion at the end of the pier. A dozen figures appeared, all wearing armor and wielding weapons. Their armor was white, with red sashes tied around the waist. The weapons, thankfully, were sheathed.

The old men and women stepped aside to let the soldiers approach. As they did… Sunny was surprised once again.

The warriors, each and every one of them… were as old as the group of people that had met them on the pier. The armor fit their shriveled figures badly, and they seemed to struggle under the weight of their weapons. Nevertheless, the old soldiers tried to maintain dignified expressions.

There was fire in their eyes, still.

The leader of the squad, an ancient woman wearing an open helmet with a red plume, bowed deeply and then saluted with a trembling hand.

"Welcome, Children of Weaver. It is my honor to witness the day of your arrival. I… will take you to the Lady. Please…"

The old woman made a gesture, asking them to follow.

Chapter-1356: The Last Sybil

Sunny studied the old woman's armor, hesitated for a few moments, then looked at the Chain Breaker with doubt.

He felt rather impatient to meet Dusk of Fallen Grace, but reminded himself to keep calm and take it one step at a time.

"...We've yet to moor our ship."

The old warrior bowed again.

"Everything will be taken care of."

'How convenient…'

These ancient soldiers did not seem like much of a threat. The old woman was an Awakened, but the rest were mundanes. Sunny had no doubt that he would be able to escape any ambush or trap they could potentially lure him into… and it didn't even seem like there would be a trap.

Still, he didn't like the idea of leaving their only means of escaping Fallen Grace behind.

…That said, if Dusk had really anticipated their arrival, wouldn't she have also anticipated his reluctance? If she knew that he would be wary of a trap, wouldn't she have been able to construct a trap insidious enough to fool Sunny?

Suddenly, he was full of apprehension.

'Damnation…'

Sunny had mostly been blessed by finding himself on the right side of people with prophetic powers. Now that he was about to meet an unfamiliar oracle, though, he fully realized how terrifying of an

enemy one could be.

His unease wasn't helped one bit by the fact that he had actually already met Dusk of Fallen Grace once… in a way. There were deep scars left on his psyche by the Terror of LO49.

'Whatever. What else can we do, demand that she comes to meet us here on the pier?'

After exchanging a glance with Nephis, Sunny shrugged and followed the group of soldiers deeper into the city. The old man who had greeted them joined, as well, which caused an irritated sigh to escape from the lips of the old woman in charge of the soldiers.

"Cronos… why are you tagging along with us, kid?"

The old man simply smiled.

"Why, I'm the one who greeted the esteemed guests first. Surely, they'll feel better having someone familiar escort them!"

The leader of the soldiers shook her head and didn't say anything else. The old man… Cronos… seemed satisfied and hurried to keep up with them.

'Kid? How ancient is this woman, to be calling a fossil like him "kid"?'

As Sunny was escorted through Fallen Grace, he couldn't help but look around with a somber expression.

Everywhere they went… they were only met by old people. Ranging from elderly to ancient, the inhabitants of Fallen Grace all had white hair, wrinkled faces, and frail bodies of people living out the last of their twilight years. They went about their business with careful steps, and looked at Sunny and Nephis with amazed expressions.

He thought that it was because of their status as guests in the city at first, but then realized that it was simply because they were… young.

Apart from Sunny and Nephis, there was not a single young person in sight.

'They are all Riverborn.'

Sunny frowned, pondering the implications of this simple realization.

Riverborn did not age with the passage of time — instead, they aged by moving upstream from the place of their birth. The process was supposed to be gradual, happening over the span of generations as the city migrated into the future to allow new families to be formed. Therefore, there had to be a mix of people of different ages on the streets, just like there would be in a normal city.

So what did it mean if everyone here was… no, looked old?

It meant that Fallen Grace had migrated far upstream for a reason other than ushering in a new generation, at some point. Killing the older population and thrusting everyone else into decrepit old bodies as a result.

Sunny's face grew somber as he looked at Cronos, one more time.

…It might have been that the leader of the soldiers had called him a kid not because she was incredibly ancient, but because the old man was actually a child, or a youth no older than Sunny and Nephis at least.

He hesitated for a few moments, then asked cautiously:

"...Cronos, was it? Say, how old are you?"

The old man smiled, his face turning into a labyrinth of deep wrinkles.

"Oh, I am seventeen, my lord! Uh… I'll be seventeen in a few days, to be precise. But who's counting?"

Sunny inhaled deeply, disturbed by the cheerful tone of that answer.

Nephis seemed to have figured out the reason for why everyone in Fallen Grace looked so old, as well. Hearing Cronos confirm it, she frowned.

"Then why aren't you at the House of Youth?"

As the words left her lips, the face of the old woman leading the soldiers darkened. While Cronos lingered, she answered in his stead:

"...It's because we lost them. We lost the entire downstream half of the city during those dark days. And if it wasn't for the Lady, we would have lost the other half, as well."

At the mention of Dusk, an expression of deep reverence and love appeared on the faces of Cronos and the old soldiers. But there was also something else, hiding behind the devotion. A hint of… sorrow? Fear? Guilt?

It was at that moment that they reached the point that should have been the center of the city.

However, it was its edge instead.

There was nothing but empty water where countless island-ships should have been. The rope bridges leading to them had been cut, their remnants singed and floating aimlessly in the water. The closest buildings to the edge bore scars and burn marks, some of them tilting sideways or laying in piles of mostly disassembled wreckage.

It was as if the whole city had been bisected into two halves, one still drifting on the crimson waves, the other long gone, lost to the unceasing pull of the past.

'So that's how it is…'

Fallen Grace had indeed migrated upstream, escaping an attack. A large part of it had been lost in the process… both in terms of island-ships, and people.

Sunny looked away with a grim expression.

"Was it because of the Defiled?"

The old woman chewed on her lips, then nodded with a strange darkness hiding in her eyes.

"Yes… a Defiled. Something like that."

After that, she remained silent.

Soon, they reached an island-ship that floated a small distance away from the rest of the city. It carried a beautiful palace built of white stone, with tall columns and a spire that rose high into the scarlet sky, crowned by a pyre of pure flame.

That was the source of the white spark they had seen from a distance.

Crossing the expanse of crimson water, Sunny and Nephis ascended the wide stairs leading to the gates of the palace and were welcomed by rows of soldiers just like the ones who had escorted them here — wearing white armor with red sashes, decrepit, and old.

All of them bowed deeply as the small procession passed them.

Finally, the gates of the temple opened in front of them.

Sunny felt an old fear grip his heart.

He was finally going to meet Dusk face-to-face… again.

Soon, they were led to a grand hall filled with white marble, flowing water, and tranquil silence. There was a tall dais in the center of it, with an elegant stone throne standing on it.

Dusk of Fallen Grace, the last sybil of the Estuary, was sitting on that throne.

Sunny froze.

The first thing he registered was that Dusk looked young… very young. She was the first young woman they saw in Fallen Grace.

She was also enthralling, with a petite figure and an exquisitely beautiful, delicate face. Her hair was like pale gold, and her stunning eyes were pure blue.

Those stunning eyes looked upon the world but didn't see anything, because the beautiful young woman was blind.

Of course, Sunny knew her well.

Stunned, he raised a hand and asked in a trembling voice:

"...Cassie?"

Chapter-1357: Long, Long Time

In front of them, sitting on the throne of Fallen Grace… was none other than Cassie. The delicate blind girl who had been their companion since the dire trial of the Forgotten Shore, and whom both Sunny and Nephis knew better than anyone else in the world did.

There could be no mistake.

Cassie had not changed much since the last time Sunny had seen her. She was still the same, with golden hair and beautiful blue eyes. The soft features of her lovely face were just as he remembered them…

But there was something different about her, too.

There was an obvious change, of course. Unlike how she was in the Nightmare Desert, Cassie looked hale and refreshed. Gone were the feverish gauntness, dark bruises, and cracked lips. Instead, her striking beauty had bloomed once more, soft and quiet yet making it impossible to look away.

She was also wearing an unfamiliar red peplos, its thin flowing fabric draped gracefully around her supple figure and decorated with white accents.

But there was also a deeper, less obvious change to her. Sunny just couldn't put his finger on what it was, exactly.

Most importantly, Cassie was not Dusk of Fallen Grace.

…Or was she?

He suddenly felt a chill.

"Cassie?"

At the sound of his voice, the blind girl slowly turned her head and looked down from her throne. Even Nephis, who rarely allowed surprise to show on her face, seemed dazed. She stared at the young woman who was… or at least looked like their friend silently, a storm of emotions hiding in her usually calm eyes.

The next moment, however, tension drained from her gaze, replaced by profound relief.

It was because Cassie smiled. Her wide, radiant smile set their hearts at ease.

It was a smile they knew.

"Sunny? Neph? You are finally here?"

The familiar sound and cadence of her familiar voice were just as they had been before, as well.

Sunny slowly exhaled and felt a strong desire to lean on something.

He had been both anticipating and dreading meeting Dusk. He had also been worried sick about the members of the cohort, and especially Cassie, since she was not as fierce of a warrior as the rest of them and more vulnerable than most. Even though Sunny had been suppressing these worries, they gnawed at his soul.

Now that the moment he had been dreading was replaced by an unexpected and joyous reunion, alleviating the gnawing worry, Sunny momentarily felt unbalanced.

Then, a million questions flooded his mind.

'Wait… why is Cassie here? Where is Dusk? Could Cassie have taken the role of Dusk in the Nightmare? Wait, then what about Torment? Why was she sent so much further downstream than Nephis and I were? How long has she been here?

Where are the others? How…'

Sensing that he was on the verge of spiraling, Sunny forcefully put those questions aside. He would be able to ask them all to Cassie,

anyway. As soon as they were able to talk freely…

As if reading his thoughts, the blind girl turned slightly and smiled at the soldiers who had escorted them into the temple. They looked at her with intense devotion, then lowered their gazes and bowed.

Cassie lingered for a moment, then spoke softly:

"The Children of Weaver are here. Please, leave. There are important matters I must discuss with them alone."

The old woman leading the soldiers looked up in protest.

"But, my Lady! It… it might not be safe!"

The blind girl chuckled.

"I know, child. I know more than most, remember."

The elderly soldier looked away in embarrassment, recalling who she was talking to. She hesitated for a moment, then bowed her head.

"Forgive me, my Lady. I… I acted out of line."

Cassie shook her head.

"No need to apologize. You only spoke out of sincere concern for me. Go and feel at ease… I also know these two. They will not harm me."

She paused for a moment and added:

"Oh… and you, Cronos. Don't think I don't know you're hiding behind a column, brat. You go as well."

An awkward cough resounded from somewhere behind, and the elderly teenager appeared in sight, scratching the back of his head.

"Ah… I was just… enjoying the splendor of the temple. Sorry, my Lady... I seem to have gotten carried away…"

Under Cassie's unseeing gaze, Cronos and the soldiers backed away and left the three of them alone…

Or so it seemed.

After the initial shock of the unexpected meeting receded, Sunny noticed two people standing in the shadows of the throne, both of them Ascended. They were an old man and an old woman, dressed in ceremonial robes. The woman wielded an unsheathed greatsword, while the man held a crimson silk cord in his hands.

Tracing his gaze, Cassie let out a quiet sigh.

"These are my guards. Don't mind them… they are deaf, and won't hear us."

Sunny was strangely disturbed by these words. Why did Cassie have two deaf guards? The whole situation somehow seemed… eerie.

At that moment, Nephis finally spoke:

"Is that old woman a teenager, as well? Are all your troops composed of children?"

The blind girl blinked a couple of times, bewildered, then shook her head.

"No? She is a few hundred years old."

Sunny tilted his head, stumped.

"What? Then why did you call her a child?"

Cassie remained motionless for a while, then sighed deeply and lowered her head.

Her voice sounded strangely hollow when she spoke, the words echoing across the white hall:

"It is because… I've been waiting for you two for a long, long time…"

In the silence that followed, both Sunny and Nephis froze. The terrible implication of what Cassie had said slowly seeped into their minds, making them realize that…

At that moment, the blind girl's shoulders trembled, and she suddenly exploded into bright laughter.

"Oh… oh gods. Sorry, I just couldn't help myself! I really did wait for a while… about a year, I think? I imagined this day a lot, and so… I just couldn't resist making this joke…"

Sunny and Nephis stared at her, stunned.

'Wha… what the hell? Who makes a joke at a moment like that?!'

His eye twitched.

'Wait. Did she say a year?'

It had been less than three months since Sunny and Nephis entered the Nightmare. So, the time storm did indeed mess up their perception of time. Just not as direly as they had feared.

Cassie, meanwhile, had gotten such a good laugh at their expense that tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. Her hands had been laying on her knees before; now, she raised them to wipe the tears away.

And when she did, Sunny heard a familiar sound.

It was the rattling of chains.

...There were golden shackles wrapped around Cassie's slender wrists, and a golden chain connected them. Wiping off her tears, the blind girl looked up with a smile and blinked. It seemed that she had noticed their confusion.

Cassie frowned a little, then touched her shackles and sighed.

"Oh… you guys don't know much about the sybils, yet. Right. I should explain."

She lingered for a moment, then glanced briefly at the two deaf Masters behind her.

One held an unsheathed sword, the other a silk cord.

Her expression remained calm and relaxed.

"When I said that these two are my guards, I didn't mean that they guard me against danger. Instead… they are guarding the city against me."

Chapter-1358: Beautiful Chains

Nothing about the situation made sense… Sunny and Nephis tentatively came to terms with the fact that Cassie had replaced Dusk of Fallen Grace, but now they were struck by yet another revelation.

Sunny did not know why the blind girl was shackled yet, but his mind had already entered a state of battle readiness… just in case. Not showing any emotions, he briefly glanced at the two deaf guards.

The sword and the cord they wielded were suddenly much more sinister. If the guards were meant to protect the city from Cassie…

Then the sword was meant to cut her down, while the cord was meant to strangle her.

'How strong can these old Masters be?'

Sunny was mentally calculating the swiftest way to kill them guards when a sudden thought sent a chill running down his spine.

His first impulse had been dictated by the deeply ingrained desire to protect Cassie… but why were the guards there, in the first place?

Looking at the beautiful young woman sitting on the white throne, wearing golden shackles, Sunny had to wonder if he should be thinking of a way to protect himself from her, instead.

She sighed.

"You don't have to worry. I'm not in danger, nor do I represent danger. It's just that… well, it's a long story. I'll explain. But first…"

Standing up, Cassie smiled and descended from the dais.

"Let me climb off that throne. It feels really odd to be looking down on you from up high."

She approached them with light steps. Her delicate figure was accentuated by the vibrant red fabric of the archaic dress, which contrasted starkly against the white marble of the grand hall. Her movements were swift and graceful... before Sunny could really decide whether he should be on guard or not, Cassie was already near.

She raised her shackled hands…

And gave Nephis a tight hug.

"I missed you… I really missed you guys a lot."

She held Neph in an embrace for a few moments, then sighed and let go. A bright smile bloomed on Cassie's face. Turning to Sunny, she hesitated a bit, then gently gripped his arm with both hands.

The golden chain rattled quietly.

"I'm so glad that you're here."

He froze, then awkwardly patted her on the hand.

'What, I don't get a hug?'

But then again, that was not the kind of relationship he had with Cassie.

What kind of relationship did they have, then?

Sunny was really not sure. If he had to describe it with one word, though, it would be… complicated.

Still, she seemed to be sincerely happy to see him. He felt the same way, too.

"We're glad to be here, as well. But… do you mind explaining what is going on? Starting with why you are chained, please."

Cassie's smile dimmed a little. She hesitated for a moment, then nodded and turned away.

"Sure. But not here... this hall is too oppressive. Follow me."

After exchanging a glance, Sunny and Nephis followed the blind girl out of the great hall and into the depths of the white temple. The two old guards did not seem concerned by the fact that their ward was moving around freely. They simply walked behind them silently, carrying the sinister sword and the silk cord.

The presence was rather ominous, but Cassie did not seem to mind.

Together, the five of them entered a grand staircase, which led them to a smaller one. The blind girl was navigating the maze-like interior of the temple with practiced ease… which wasn't that surprising, considering that she must have spent a whole year here. Sometimes, she traced the marble walls with her hand, but mostly she simply counted her steps and moved by memory.

Eventually, they ascended a tall tower and emerged onto an open platform. There was a massive brazier in its center, with a pyre of white flame rising high into the crimson sky from it… this was the flame they had noticed from afar, and which guided them to Fallen Grace.

Cassie lingered in front of the brazier for a few moments, bathing in its heat. Her expression turned a little distant.

After a while, she said quietly:

"...Right. I don't need to maintain the flame anymore."

Turning around with a smile, she gestured to a small table that stood near the aery railing of the platform.

"Please. Sit down. You must be tired after spending so long on the River."

The table was brimming with fresh fruit, crystal pitchers of wine, and savory snacks. Cassie did not have to ask them twice, since Sunny and Nephis were indeed tired after the long journey, hungry, and parched.

Soon, the three of them were sitting around the table, enjoying the

refreshments.

From the height of the temple's spire, the whole of Fallen Grace was revealed to them, as well as the fiery expanse of the flowing water painted in a million shades of red by dusk.

Looking at the surreal sight of the endless crimson river, Sunny couldn't help but notice how damaged and incomplete the city looked. It was indeed as though it had been cut in half, with many of the island-ships either missing or taking a position in the flotilla that was clearly not meant for them.

Taking a sip of fragrant red wine, Cassie sighed and turned to face Fallen Grace, as well. She was holding the glass with both hands, careful not to let the golden chain get in the way.

Eventually, she said:

"...I entered the Nightmare around a year ago. It was very disorienting, as you must have experienced yourself. Especially once I realized that I had taken the place of Dusk, the sybil of Fallen Grace. Dusk… I don't know how powerful she was, exactly, but she must have been at least a Transcendent. While I am not."

Sunny nodded somberly and added in a low voice:

"The last sybil."

The blind girl turned to him with a strange, fragile smile.

"Yes. The last. Although… I wasn't so at the start."

Nephis frowned, feeling a dark undertone in Cassie's voice.

"Wasn't so? What do you mean?"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, her face turning solemn. Then, she said:

"The sybils were oracles once. The revelations they received came from the gods. But then, the gods grew silent… and, one after another, the sybils turned to another source of knowledge. The

Estuary. What revelations do you think they received from there?"

Chapter-1359: See no Evil

Sunny suddenly paled.

'Wait. No way…'

The runes describing the Shroud of Graceless Dusk resurfaced in his memory…

[There, they found solace, safety, and shelter. In time, the voices of the gods grew silent one after another, leaving behind only a vast and dreadful silence. That was how the sybils embraced the Estuary, and that was how they fell.]

He looked at Cassie somberly and said, his voice slightly hoarse:

"The… Defilement?"

The blind girl nodded sadly.

"Yes. The Defilement spread from the Estuary, consuming Verge, the city of the Seekers. And from there, the Defiled slowly moved upstream, threatening to devour all other settlements on the Great River. The sybils and their people waged a war against them for a long time. Eventually, most of their cities fell — some fell to the Defiled… but not all."

Her beautiful face looked forlorn for a moment.

Cassie sighed.

"The sybils were truly formidable at the height of their power. It was no coincidence that they had managed to guide their people through the horrors of the Doom War and enter the Tomb of Ariel unharmed. Even the Defiled found it difficult to conquer the cities reigned by the sybils… how would they not, if the defenders knew the secrets of the

future?"

She paused for a moment and took a small sip of the wine.

"But the very thing that gave the sybils power ended up becoming their undoing. The most stalwart cities… they fell to the sybils themselves. Because they were corrupted by the glimpses of the Estuary and succumbed to the Defilement, letting the rot spread from within."

The blind girl sighed again, then shook her head.

"A year ago, there were three sybils in Fallen Grace. One was already Defiled, and entombed in her temple. Of the other two, Dusk was the junior. The senior sybil… she had hidden the signs of Corruption from everyone until it was too late. The day she lost control was the day I took Dusk's place."

She lingered for a moment and gestured to the city below.

"This is what I managed to preserve. I was able to rally the defenders of Fallen Grace and slay the Defiled sybil. But, by then, much of the city had already been lost. Much worse, the seals containing the other Defiled had been broken. And she… she was a much more terrifying creature than the other one.

All I could do was abandon the contested island-ships and evacuate the remaining ones as far upstream as I could."

Cassie smiled faintly and raised her hands, allowing the golden chain to ring.

"Hence, these shackles. And the deaf guards. I am the ruler of this city, but at the same time, I am a threat to it… or so the River People think, since they don't know that I am not truly Dusk. I was afraid that my own affinity to revelations would place me in the same danger the sybils had been exposed to, but funnily enough, I turned out to be immune to it. Can you guess why?"

Sunny and Nephis looked at her silently, not knowing what to answer. Sunny was a bit confused.

'I get why Nephis is not in danger of becoming Defiled. Her soul is incorruptible… but how can Cassie be immune, as well?'

He shook his head.

"I'm not sure."

She chuckled, then pointed to herself.

"It's because I'm blind."

Her beautiful blue eyes gazed upon the world, unseeing. Cassie sighed softly.

"Whatever it is that the sybils saw in their visions of the Estuary, I can't see. That is why the truth of the Estuary can't corrupt me… or at least, can't corrupt me in the same way it corrupted the sybils. In the visions I had before entering the Tomb of Ariel, I usually had sight. But ever since coming here, all I see is darkness. Who knew it would be a blessing?"

She smiled and moved her hands slightly, allowing the golden chain to fall back onto her lap.

"Anyway. I knew that you would arrive eventually, but I did not know how long it would take. So, I remained in Fallen Grace and defended the city from the attacks of the Defiled. It was… a long year. What took you so long?"

Nephis leaned forward and grasped Cassie's hand. White sparks glinted in her calm grey eyes.

"You did well, Cas. I'm sorry. We entered the Nightmare much further upstream, and it took us a long time to travel into the past. We encountered a time storm on the way… which is why, while a year has passed for you, it was only a few months to us."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then added:

"But you must have known that already, right? It was thanks to you that Ananke knew to meet us and point us in the direction of Fallen Grace."

A strange expression appeared on Cassie's face. He frowned, confused by her reaction.

"What? What's wrong?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"I'm sorry… but who is Ananke? And what do you mean she knew to guide you to Fallen Grace? I'm afraid I don't understand."

Sunny and Nephis exchanged a somber look. After a moment of silence, she asked carefully:

"...Was it not you who sent a dream message to the Priestess of Weave? To warn her of our arrival?"

Cassie simply shook her head.

"Send a dream message? I don't even know how to do something like that, let alone who the Priestess of Weave is. I also wouldn't have known where you were. Are you saying that there was someone who did?"

Sunny suddenly felt an ominous premonition.

He was somewhat convinced that it was Dusk who had sent Ananke instructions to meet them and guide them to Fallen Grace. Now that he knew that Cassie had taken the place of the last sybil, though, and she was not the mysterious being pulling the strings of the Nightmare from behind the scenes…

There was a small possibility, of course, that Dusk had arranged everything before being erased from existence by Cassie's arrival. But it was infinitely small… had the last sybil even existed in the Nightmare? Why would the Spell extend its timeline beyond the point where the challengers entered?

And even if it had, what were the chances that Dusk not only knew of her nature as a phantom conjured by the Spell, but also everything about the challengers and their task?

Close to zero.

However…

If not Dusk or Cassie, then who could have possessed both a deep knowledge of the future and enough insight to manipulate it?

Sunny gritted his teeth, disturbed.

"Not only did they know when and where we would enter the Nightmare, but also a great deal more. It was how we ended up finding the ship… the Chain Breaker. And making it all the way here."

Cassie seemed stunned.

"The… Chain Breaker…"

She remained silent for a while, then shivered and said, her voice glum:

"Well, then... maybe it was Torment."

Chapter-1360: Marooned

A grim silence settled over the open platform. Even the deaf guards seemed affected by it, shifting uncomfortably and throwing worried glances at Cassie. Knowing what he knew now, Sunny recognized the complicated emotions reflected in their eyes… love, devotion, loyalty.

But also wariness and fear.

He sighed, then took a bite out of a succulent fruit and leaned back.

"So… you guessed who the Six Plagues are, too."

Of course, she did. Cassie always knew more than them, even if she kept it to herself.

The blind girl nodded slowly.

"I did… who they are, but not how they are. The Great River is a strange place. Many things that should not be possible anywhere else are possible here."

She frowned.

"The Six Plagues — I had to learn a lot about them, since they are the main threat to Fallen Grace. It was hard not to draw conclusions in the process. Strangely enough, though, none of them participated in the attacks on the city during the year I've spent here."

Nephis looked at her somberly.

"Were you serious about what you said? That Torment might be responsible for us coming here?"

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then shook her head.

"Not really. She strikes me as someone far too wild and damaged to come up with such an intricate scheme. She's dangerous, though… after the Dread Lord, she has to be the most dangerous of the Plagues. Simply because of her foresight."

So, there was no answer after all. Sunny was still unable to learn who it was that had been manipulating the Nightmare, unseen, showing terrifying knowledge of fate and the future.

There was another problem facing them currently, though…

'Not good.'

Meeting Dusk might have turned out entirely differently from how Sunny and Nephis had imagined it, but their overall goal remained the same. They had to conquer the Nightmare… but first, they had to find the members of the cohort.

Their last theory was that each challenger except for Nephis had been sent into the body of a powerful Defiled champion… who might or might not have been the future version of themselves.

Regardless of the true identity of the Six Plagues, that theory had been proven wrong now. After all, Cassie was right here in front of them, in place of the last sybil, Dusk — not Torment.

Which meant that they had no idea where the other members were.

And since it had already been a year since the Nightmare started…

Sunny felt intense worry gnaw at his heart.

'No, no... don't think about it.'

Looking at Cassie, he hesitated for a while, then composed himself and asked:

"You said you knew that we would arrive eventually?"

The blind girl nodded.

"Yes. I saw us meeting, in a vision. Or rather, felt it."

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Then what about the others? Do you know where they are?"

There was one more question that he had, but couldn't bring himself to ask.

'Are they alive?'

Cassie suddenly smiled. The melancholy shrouding her features was vanquished, her face illuminated by that smile.

"Yes! Of course!"

She froze, then coughed awkwardly.

"...They're alive, I mean. Sorry."

'Right. I should remember who I'm talking to…'

The blind girl was more than capable of answering questions that had not been asked yet.

Her smile dimmed a little, and Cassie sighed.

"I haven't wasted the whole year doing nothing, you know. Apart from making sure that Fallen Grace is not conquered by the Defilement, I also tried to learn as much as I could. About the world, the Tomb… I also tried to find the others, of course."

Nephis leaned forward, a hint of excitement in her eyes.

"And?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"I managed to determine their locations. Effie and Jet are together… are, here it is."

Suddenly, a small shadow fell on the platform, and a familiar crow landed on Cassie's shoulder. It stared at Sunny with an aggrieved expression, and then cawed loudly:

"Sah-nee! Sah-nee!"

It was Jet's crow Echo.

Staring at the bird with excitement, he asked:

"They're here, in Fallen Grace?"

The crow suddenly looked crestfallen. It shook its beak slightly, then cawed sadly:

"Stuck! Stuck!"

Both Sunny and Nephis looked at Cassie, worry apparent in their eyes.

She sighed.

"They are alive, and together. But they are caught in a dangerous zone of the Great River, unable to escape. I spent a lot of time trying to locate the exact coordinates of where they are marooned, but only succeeded after this Echo found me. I would have tried to rescue them myself, but Dusk is… I am… the only Outsider left in Fallen Grace. I couldn't leave before you arrived."

Sunny nodded, both relieved and concerned. It was good that Effie and Jet were together… and it was even better that Cassie had determined their exact location. The existence of the crow Echo also proved that at least one of them was still alive.

And yet, how could he not worry when he had just learned that they were stuck in some bizarre hazardous zone of the Great River?

Nephis inhaled deeply, then asked:

"What about Kai and Mordret? Anvil's son?"

The blind girl frowned.

"They… are also together. However, their situation is worse."

She lingered for a few moments and said darkly:

"They are in Twilight."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, confused. He suppressed the impulse to touch the Crown of Twilight and asked:

"Twilight? The city of the Serpent King? Wasn't it destroyed?"

Cassie remained silent for a while. Eventually, she shrugged with uncertainty.

"It is lost, but it is not destroyed. The legends say that it was devoured by time. I… am not sure what it means. In fact, I am not sure about anything that has to do with King Daeron and his people."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Why is that?"

A deep frown appeared on the blind girl's face. She pursed her lips, then said hesitantly:

"Everything about them is odd. They were not Riverborn… but they weren't refugees from the Dream Realm, either. They appeared within the Tomb much, much later than the sybils and the Seekers, when the River People civilization had already been established and the Defilement had already spread."

Cassie lingered for a bit, and then added:

"If not for the fact that they simply can't be from Earth, I would have said that they... they were challengers just like us, each and every one of them."

Chapter-1361: Devoured by Time

'Challengers just like us… each and every one of them.'

Sunny remained silent for a while, a complicated expression on his face. He was remembering the very beginning of the Nightmare, and the strange words the Spell had spoken…

[Thirteen million, seven hundred thousand, and seventy seven brave ones… welcome to the Nightmare!]

Back then, he had been understandably stunned and confused. There was no explanation for that number, considering that there were not even a million Awakened in the waking world. The start of the Nightmare had been abnormal in more than one way, though, and so he tentatively attributed these words to an error made by the Spell.

However, Sunny had never been truly convinced that the Spell was even capable of being mistaken. So, what if it had been correct?

He slowly exhaled.

"They are."

Cassie turned her head slightly, confused.

"How can it be?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure. But I know for a fact that the people of Twilight were challengers. It is because… we've met King Daeron, Nephis and I."

It was written in the description of the Crown of Twilight — "thus, the valiant king became a guide who guarded his people in their

nightmares". That had been Daeron's entire plan, to enter the Tomb of Ariel so that a phantom of him would be conjured by the Spell to guide his people when they challenged the Nightmare.

It had already seemed strange when Sunny first read the runes. However, back then, he had not met Ananke yet… and therefore, had not learned that there were no Nightmares in the ancient past of the Dream Realm.

So where had the Serpent King and his people come from?

"You've… met the Serpent King?"

Cassie's voice trembled a little.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, and then briefly described their long journey into the past. With each sentence Sunny spoke, the story sounded more and more implausible.

Great Nightmare Creatures, furious storms of broken time, ghost ships that appeared out of nowhere just when they were needed… it was very much like the fairy tale of astonishing adventures that Ananke had told him. And yet, it was all true, of course.

Because Sunny was the one telling it.

"...And so, we repaired the ship as best we could and set sail in search of Fallen Grace. There were many battles on the way, but as you can see, we are both in one piece."

He paused for a moment, and then added somberly:

"None of the Nightmare Creatures we faced was as terrible as the Azure Serpent had been, though. As Daeron of the Twilight Sea had been."

Cassie frowned.

"I've heard that Twilight had its own culture and was an independent city, not at all similar to the ones established by the sybils. I also heard that they were tremendously powerful and even laid siege to Verge, at one point, which ended in disaster. Many of the Twilight

people were Outsiders, maybe even all of them. But… challengers? Where could they have come from?"

Sunny slumped in his chair, thinking. Eventually, he said with doubt:

"Maybe… maybe they came from the future of the waking world? Either that, or they were the last remnants of the Dream Realm humans, from the time of extinction after the Doom War had ended. Seeds of Nightmares should have first appeared sometime between when the sybils entered the Tomb and when the Spell infected our world.

So… maybe Daeron ruled then, during the twilight of human civilization in the aftermath of the war."

Wasn't that also what the description of the Crown of Twilight said? "There was a king who ruled over a dying land…"

Nephis sighed.

"It is strange, though. If these people were indeed challengers, they would have entered the Nightmare by taking someone's place. Were there thirteen million humans inhabiting the Great River, even? I doubt it."

She lingered for a few moments, then added somberly:

"There is one thing that concerns me much more, though. Cassie, you said that Twilight was not destroyed, but lost… devoured by time. None of us knows what it means, exactly, but we do know that the Serpent King at least managed to escape. He was a demented beast when we met him, his soul consumed by Corruption. So… will we find millions of powerful Nightmare Creatures when we reach Twilight?

Is that lost city an even bigger threat than Verge?"

Sunny suddenly felt cold. As he considered her dreadful words, Cassie said in a cautious tone:

"There is such a possibility. The inhabitants of Twilight can also be long dead. Lastly… there is also a possibility that we will find

millions of powerful Awakened warriors, not abominations, when we reach Twilight."

He blinked.

'She's… right.'

Twilight could turn out to be a dire threat, but it could also be hiding an army of allies they sorely needed to destroy Verge and conquer the Nightmare.

There was no point in guessing, either way.

Sunny sighed.

"We'll find out when we get there. And we do need to get there — we can't leave Kai behind. We also need Mordret and his power to take on Verge, and his knowledge to eliminate the Soul Stealer."

He looked at Nephis, then at Cassie.

"...There are no objections, right?"

Nephis shook her head.

"Our goal remains the same. Gather the cohort and eliminate the First Seeker… who is far downstream, in the city of Verge. Under the protection of the Six Plagues."

She frowned slightly.

"Although… the task does seem too perilous. There has to be a way to accomplish it, or the Spell wouldn't have sent us here. So, we must be lacking some key piece of information or an important advantage, still. Twilight might very well be the place where that secret is hidden."

Sunny nodded.

"So, we're in agreement then? Let's go fetch Effie and Jet first, then sail to Twilight to retrieve Kai and Mordret. When everyone is gathered and we had learned everything there is to learn, we'll attack

Verge."

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then said quietly:

"I agree. However, we must not forget one crucial detail."

Her beautiful face turned solemn.

"I doubt that the Six Plagues will just remain idle and allow us to gather forces. If they are truly the future versions of ourselves… they must already know what our next steps will be. It would be easy for them to try and stop us."

Sunny didn't even want to think about the paradoxical mess of having his future Defiled self hunting him down.

However, he wasn't opposed to it.

Imagining the vile, scarred face of the Mad Prince, he grinned darkly.

"Let them come... I would love to meet the bastards, too."

Chapter-1362: No Other Choice

Some time later, the three of them were walking across the pier, followed by an excited crowd. The two guards were not far behind, either — they never left Cassie's side. The golden chain was ringing softly with each step she took.

The elderly citizens of Fallen Grace were overflowing with joy at the sight of their young and beautiful priestess, though, seemingly oblivious to the ominous meaning behind the golden shackles. The news of the arrival of two Outsiders had spread throughout the city, as well.

The mood was festive.

Sunny studied their faces through the shadows, then turned to Cassie and said silently:

"You seem to be very popular. They absolutely adore you."

A faint smile appeared on her face.

"...It's Dusk, not me. And how could they not? She was a wise and benevolent ruler, not to mention a champion of the city. It was because of the sybils that the River People could defend themselves against the Defilement. Most importantly… I am both the most powerful Awakened and the only Outsider left in Fallen Grace.

If they lose their faith in me and their love for me, then all they'll have left will be despair."

She let out a wistful sigh.

"They only love me because they have no other choice."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, somewhat stunned by how

cynical that statement sounded. It bothered him a great deal, for some reason.

Then, he shook his head.

"Still, you must have done a lot to earn their trust. Surviving a year in the Third Nightmare could not have been easy. Especially alone."

He had already seen Fallen Grace and its people. They were not the kind of force he had hoped to find… and while Cassie had not gone into detail when describing her attempts to defend the city against the attacking Defiled, it was easy to surmise that protecting it was more of a burden than a boon.

Her days must have been filled with countless battles and narrow victories. It was a miracle that Fallen Grace still stood.

She smiled.

"Ah… well, yes. After the initial chaos, I led the remaining warriors into battle many times, and killed many abominations. It was indeed not easy. But I wasn't really alone."

Cassie gestured to the crowd following them at a respectful distance, as well as at the two silent guards.

"The people of Fallen Grace might have grown weak, but they are valiant and brave. I also had several Echoes to assist me."

'...Right.'

Neph had once brought back a powerful Echo from the Nightmare Desert , a Fallen Demon with six arms. That Echo had been given to one of the Fire Keepers before his cohorts challenged a Seed of Nightmare. She would have arranged for a powerful bodyguard or two for Cassie, as well.

Sunny tilted his head.

"How strong are your Echoes, exactly?"

The blind girl remained silent for a moment.

"You already know the Quiet Dancer. Her power is augmented by a special Memory I received from Valor, albeit not by much. There is also an artificial Echo Neph procured for me from the clan, as well, equal in power to a Fallen Monster. And… there is an Echo I earned here in the Tomb of Ariel myself. A… Transcendent Beast, of sorts."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Of sorts?"

Cassie let out a quiet sigh.

"It's the Echo of the senior sybil I killed. I try not to summon her where the citizens of Fallen Grace can see."

Sunny flinched a little. After a few moments of silence, Nephis suddenly spoke, her voice even:

"You alone should be enough to deal with two Masters. With a Transcendent Echo, those guards of yours stand no chance whatsoever. What is the point of them following you around?"

Cassie smiled sadly.

"...Yes. There's no real point. I can easily kill them, and I can easily break out of these chains. They know it perfectly well. But they are loyal and devoted to their duty… and so, I remain in chains out of respect for their devotion. Isn't it sad?

The fact that I am only guarded by two Masters should tell you everything you need to know about how desperate Fallen Grace's situation is. Unless we act, it will be swallowed by the Defilement soon enough."

Sunny sighed, trying to imagine what had happened to the real Fallen Grace… and real Dusk. He knew that the last sybil had been buried at sea, her body eventually becoming the vessel of a Corrupted Terror.

The existence of the Terror of LO49 was proof that the civilization of the Great River had met a sorrowful end.

And it would meet it again if they failed to conquer the Nightmare...

Just then, they reached the end of the pier and walked across a wooden plank to the deck of the ghostly ship. The crowd stayed back, with only the two guards following them aboard the ancient vessel.

Cassie froze, lowering her hands and staring into nothingness with her beautiful blue eyes. After a while, she said softly:

"Sunny… can you look at the sacred tree?"

He did as he was told, belatedly realizing that the blind girl must have used her Ascended Ability to share his perception. Although he didn't feel anything, it also felt strangely… violating.

There was no harm done, but for someone as secretive as Sunny, sharing was an uncomfortable process.

'I wonder if she sees the bastard.'

He threw a furtive glance at the Sin of Solace, who stood motionlessly below the tree, and suppressed his discomfort.

They walked around the ship for a while, allowing Cassie to study both its exterior and interior. She was the person who knew the true Chain Breaker best, after all, so they needed her judgment to rid themselves of doubt.

Eventually, the blind girl stopped near the sacred tree and gently placed her palm on the white bark.

After a few moments of silence, she sighed and turned to them.

"It's the Chain Breaker. I am certain."

Sunny and Nephis grew somber.

They had suspected as much, of course… but still, a slight hope that it was merely a similar vessel still lived in their hearts.

Now, it was utterly extinguished.

Cassie pointed here and there, describing her findings.

"...the essence channels are severely damaged, but their shape is unmistakable. I repaired them myself once, after all, so I know every small detail of how Noctis had carved new enchantments into the older ones created by the Fire Hunters. It's his ship… our ship. There are many differences, but the core is the same."

Sunny grimaced.

"But how the hell can it be here? And how did we end up finding it?"

The blind girl hesitated, then somberly shook her head.

"That, I cannot answer."

He closed his eyes, then rubbed his face tiredly.

'What the hell is going on… what the hell has been going on from the start of this damned Nightmare? There are too many unexplainable things!'

Sunny's tolerance for mysteries was at its limits.

Cassie lingered for a few moments, then suddenly spoke:

"I can tell you one thing, though."

Both Sunny and Nephis looked at her, waiting.

She pointed to the deck below her feet and smiled.

"...I think I can repair the enchantments again. If you give me some time, the Chain Breaker will be able to fly once more."

Chapter-1363: The Shadow, the Star, and the Oracle

The news that the Chain Breaker could be restored to its former… future?... glory was a welcome one. However, it was going to take time for Cassie to repair it. They were also going to need a lot of materials, as well as plenty of help from the locals of Fallen Grace.

There were experienced shipbuilders among them. Sunny and Nephis had only patched up the ancient vessel well enough for it to not sink immediately, but there were a lot of things they weren't able to achieve. Now, the situation was different.

Just repairing the hull and the decks was going to take a few weeks. After that part was done, more intricate work would start — Cassie was going to have to restore the runic pathways that made the enchantments of the flying ship work.

That sounded like a lot of time.

Sunny and Nephis knew that an entire year had already passed within the Tomb of Ariel since the start of the Nightmare, and yet they felt uneasy wasting even a single day. The members of the cohort were somewhere out there, after all, their situations unknown. Perhaps they were in desperate need of help.

In the end, the three of them decided not to postpone their departure too much. Sunny and Nephis needed to rest, and the Chain Breaker had to receive urgent repairs… but since Cassie would be able to work on the enchantments alone, they were going to leave Fallen Grace as soon as the work on the damaged portions of the hull was finished.

Which left them with maybe two weeks of peaceful time to recover and prepare themselves.

Looking at the crimson blaze of dusk from the window of Cassie's private chambers, Sunny sighed.

The sky was a painting of beautiful red, and the Great River was like a sea of burning blood. The city below them was like a snow flower.

"...Are you going to be alright, leaving Fallen Grace behind?"

Turning away from the window, he looked at the blind girl. She was brewing tea, seemingly not at all inconvenienced by her golden shackles.

Nephis was nearby, too, studying the murals on the wall.

Cassie softly shook her head.

"I did get attached to these people. But what we are doing is for their sake, as well… if we don't strike at Verge, there is no future left for the River People. In a few years, or decades at most, they will be gone."

If they were the real River People, of course. As far as humans of the waking world knew, the world of the Nightmare would cease to exist as soon as the Seed was conquered. But… it was hard to make the distinction.

Sunny had never been able to, at least.

He walked over to the table and sat down.

"Do they understand that? Will they let you go?"

The two guards were standing just outside the door. Even though he could not see them, he could feel their shadows.

Cassie lingered for a few moments, pouring the tea into beautiful ceramic cups.

"They will. I'll explain it well… don't worry. Come, let's have some tea."

Nephis pulled her attention away from the murals and joined them at

the table. Her face was calm and composed.

Raising her cup, she hesitated for a bit, then said in an even tone:

"I haven't had a chance to say it. But I… I missed you too. And I'm glad that we found each other, too."

She looked at Cassie, then at Sunny. Her gaze lingered on his face for a few extra moments.

Then, Nephis took a sip of the fragrant amber liquid and smiled faintly.

"It's like the good old times."

Sunny was considering saying something heartfelt as well, but then surrendered to the embarrassment of showing his true feelings and pretended to choke on his tea instead.

"Good? Which times exactly are you calling good? The time when I got skewered by a Carapace Centurion, or when that damned tree mesmerized us? Or when we were attacked by that depth dweller while crossing the dark sea at night?"

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.

"...Yes."

He stared.

'If that's her idea of a good time… I'll be damned, that actually explains a lot…'

Sunny felt sorry for the guy who would take Changing Star on a date one day.

As he did, the Sin of Solace laughed derisively.

"Self-pity, huh?"

'Shut the hell up!'

He threw an angry glance at the sword wraith, then shook his head.

Who was he kidding? Sunny had felt nostalgic about the simple days of surviving on the Forgotten Shore many times. The hell of it... had also been like a dark paradise, for him.

Looking through a shadow, he studied the three of them — Nephis, Cassie, and himself.

'Gods.'

Each one of them had changed so much. They were practically unrecognizable… and it wasn't even because of how much their appearance had been transformed by the Awakening and the Ascension.

Back then… Sunny had been a powerless street rat who only cared about himself and how to keep his secret. Cassie had been a sweet, but helpless girl, broken by the severity of her crippling Flaw. Nephis had been an isolated young woman who didn't know much about the world, except for the fact that she was going to burn it to the ground.

'Look at us now.'

The scrawny kid from the outskirts was gone, replaced by a fair young man with eyes so cold and dark that it was easy to cut yourself on their chilling gaze. The helpless girl was now a beautiful young woman whose softness concealed unwavering will and ominous power. Nephis… had changed the most, perhaps, learning too many bitter lessons.

Their names were known across the world, and they had long lost count of all the powerful abominations cut down by their blades. Fallen, Corrupted, even Great. Devils, Terrors, even Titans.

There had been humans, too... Awakened, Masters, and even Saints.

Who would have thought that three teenagers that had met in the Crimson Labyrinth would be drinking tea in a hidden world created by a daemon one day, resting before setting sail to wage war on an entire city of Nightmare Creatures?

Sunny took a sip of his tea and shook his head.

'Life is sure funny sometimes.'

Still… it was damn good tea.

He hesitated for a while, and then said awkwardly:

"I... might have missed you, too. I'm glad that the three of us are once again together."

Chapter-1364: Creating New Memories Together

The Great River flowed endlessly. Somewhere in the future, the ruins of Weave drifted empty and silent, with no one left to witness their inevitable march toward destruction. Somewhere in the past, the city of Verge stood, harboring the hidden horrors of the Defilement.

There was Twilight, too, mysterious and dreadful, lost to time.

…But here in Fallen Grace, the days were peaceful.

The work on the Chain Breaker started soon after Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie finished their tea. He visited the piers to observe the repairs, but there was really no point. The elderly citizens of the last human city knew how to tend to a ship much better than he did, and even though their bodies were ancient and frail, there were still some Awakened among them.

Their physical strength solved many problems, so Sunny did not need to help. The best he could do was not get in the way.

Knowing that there were many battles ahead, he dedicated his time to preparing as thoroughly as possible. Cassie and Nephis were doing the same. The latter was practicing her swordsmanship witthout rest, while the former… actually, Sunny was not entirely sure what their blind oracle was doing.

She spent a lot of time arranging measures to keep Fallen Grace safe in her absence, but also made a point of sparing as much of it as possible for him and Nephis. They had meals together, toured the city, and held long strategy meetings.

He was happy because the three of them were together again.

But it was also a bit strange.

Cassie had spent an entire year in the Nightmare… which meant that she was older than Sunny by a few months now, making him the youngest in the cohort. He had treated her as a little sister once, at the start of it all, so it felt odd to suddenly be the one who was younger.

But then again, age was such an abstract thing… especially so for the Awakened. Sunny himself had spent an unknown length of time in the dream prison created by Nightmare. Even though he had forgotten most of that cruel trial, his soul still remembered its scars.

Speaking of Nightmare, the dark destrier was his main priority for now. Sunny had been unsure that he would be able to create enough Memories to help his steed Ascend before departure from Fallen Grace, but he was pleasantly surprised to have been mistaken.

There were two main reasons for that. The first one was that Cassie had opened the treasury of the temple to supply him with the few soul shards he lacked. The second one was the Crown of Twilight.

Its [Legacy of Twilight] enchantment greatly enhanced the rate with which Sunny regenerated essence at dawn and dusk. Here in Fallen Grace, though, dusk lasted for nearly the entire day, interrupted only by a brief and fleeting night — as a result, his reserves of essence had become nearly inexhaustible.

…Which was a good thing for more than one reason. The three of them were destined to visit the lost city of the Serpent King, after all. Twilight was situated at the opposite edge of the Great River, where it was almost always dawn. Sunny was certain that having a boundless amount of essence at his disposal would come in handy, no matter what dangers they were going to face there.

For now, he concentrated on weaving Memories to feed Nightmare above all else. The counter of shadow fragments was rising with each day.

So was the counter of nightmares the tenebrous steed had subjugated, at a speed much greater than ever before. Maybe because of the

nature of the Tomb of Ariel… but much more importantly, because of the River People.

In the waking world, his Shadow had very few ways of collecting nightmares — it was because the dreams of mundane humans were powerless, while Awakened never dreamed. It was only Masters and abominations that could supply his Shadow with suitable dreams to subjugate.

But Awakened of the Dream Realm — and therefore, the River People of the Tomb of Ariel — were different from those infected by the Spell. Their souls did not travel between worlds when they slept, and so, Nightmare could invade their dreams and conquer their fears.

As a result, the citizens of Fallen Grace enjoyed strangely blissful sleep during these days, while his Shadow received plenty of nightmares to add to his swarm.

At this rate, Sunny did not know what would happen first — the black steed's Ascension or return to full power as a Terror.

He worked tirelessly to weave more rudimentary Memories, and do it faster.

One after another, they were completed.

And then, finally… Sunny weaved the last of them.

The date of their departure was already drawing near when he did. Hidden in the spacious chambers Cassie had arranged for him within the temple, Sunny slowly dismissed his four shadow arms and put Weaver's Needle down.

Left in his human hand was a beautiful nacre ornament. What made it look so tantalizing was not the colorful sheen, though, but the ethereal weave hiding behind it.

"It's done."

Sunny exhaled slowly, then dismissed the ornament and stretched.

'I did it.'

He felt both tired and exhilarated. Nightmare only needed one more Transcendent Memory to reach Ascension — and now, that Memory was complete.

Standing up, Sunny looked at the crimson sky beyond the window. The night had already passed, which meant that his Shadow should have returned to its post. These days, the black steed was usually hiding in the shadows near where the Chain Breaker was being repaired, guarding the workers on his orders.

'I better go visit him right now, then.'

As Sunny contemplated how much stronger Nightmare would become as an Ascended Terror, a swift shadow fell from the sky and landed on the windowsill. It was Jet's crow.

The small bird jumped a couple of times, then stared at him angrily and cawed:

"Stuck! Stuck!"

He sighed.

"I know, Crow Crow. We'll go get your master soon. Hey, I want to see her too! Just wait for a few more days."

The Echo had been hanging around him a lot, perhaps out of familiarity. Whenever Sunny was tired from weaving, he would study the small avian creature and try to appease its impatience.

Suddenly, a smile appeared on his lips.

"But first… do you want to come find Nightmare with me?"

The bird tilted its head and stared at him with its round eyes. Then, it opened its beak and cawed:

"Horse! Horse!"

Sunny chuckled.

"Yes. The horse. Come on!"

'Let's try it again…'

With that, he dissolved into darkness and manifested himself back into tangible form. This time, Sunny did not recreate his own appearance, instead shaping himself into an entirely different and smaller creature.

…A few moments later, two crows — one black, the other even darker, as if made of shadows — flew into the crimson sky.

Chapter-1365: The Sound of His Wings

Sunny was flying through the crimson sky above Fallen Grace. His black feathers were moving slightly in the wind, and his wings rose and fell with a relaxed cadence. His flight was somewhat awkward… but he did not plummet to the ground, at least, like the previous time.

He had, of course, assumed the form of a crow.

After mastering the fourth step of Shadow Dance, learning a new form had become much easier for him. So, he had spent the last two weeks doing just that — teaching himself how to become a crow. Sunny was already confident on land and had the sea serpent form to protect himself in the water. Only the skies were left unconquered.

Granted, he was not going to win a battle as a small bird… but he had to start somewhere.

The idea of trying to assume the form of Jet's Echo had entered his mind when he was resting after a long and tedious bout of weaving. Yes, Sunny had plenty of essence and more than enough soul shards to accomplish his goal, but even his patience was not limitless. He needed to take a break from time to time and distract himself from the rote process of creating rudimentary Memories.

During one such break, the persistent crow visited him once again to caw about how Jet was stuck. Staring at it, Sunny remembered that he had not yet made use of his improved ability to shadow various creatures better. The desire to fly across the vast sky stirred in his heart.

Who said that only Kai was allowed to zip around in the air?

So, that was exactly what he had done. Staring at the talkative bird, he tried to teach himself its form.

Which… ended up being just as hard to achieve as turning himself into a giant sea serpent.

The body of the crow itself was much smaller and simpler. The problem was that Crow Crow was an Echo, and thus not truly alive. So, Sunny met an unexpected obstacle… Shadow Dance was not that effective against things that weren't alive.

In hindsight, he should have known that it would be like that. Thinking back to how he created the form of the onyx serpent, and even further into the past, to the days of learning battle styles from his adversaries, Sunny realized that there were two components to Shadow Dance.

One was purely physical, the other was much deeper and more fundamental, concerning the essence of a being.

Its mind, its spirit, its very soul.

Echoes did not really possess any of these things, so he was left stumped for a while.

In the end, though, Sunny still managed to turn himself into a copy of the crow. It had just taken him much more time and effort than he would have expected… and he did not stop having trouble with the new form after mastering it.

Possessing the body of a bird was one thing, but actually moving like a bird was an entirely different issue. Since Sunny had never flown without the help of enchantments before, he had to learn everything from scratch.

The first time he turned into a crow, he proceeded to fall on his beak after the simplest hop… a few dozen times in a row, all under the perplexed gaze of the befuddled Echo.

Nevertheless, he was flying right now.

It was a rather exhilarating feeling.

It was so exhilarating, in fact, that Sunny opened his beak and cawed:

"Fly! Fly!"

Then, he got embarrassed and almost lost control of his wings.

'Now… why the hell did I say it twice?'

Shaking his head slightly, Sunny looked at the dry dock where the Chain Breaker stood, being repaired by a large number of craftsmen, and cautiously descended toward it.

He did not fall… until the last second.

Jet's Echo landed with natural ease and hopped a couple of times in excitement, but Sunny gracelessly sprawled on the cobblestones after rolling a couple of times.

'Ouch. There's still room for improvement.'

Sighing internally, he let the form of the crow dissolve into a formless shadow, then emerged from it as his human self.

Being a human felt cumbersome and boring.

…But he was also slightly shocked by the ferocious strength hiding in his slender, pale body.

'Damn. I've only been a crow for a minute…'

Looking around, Sunny tried to find the shadow in which Nightmare was hiding. He did not notice his steed immediately, but he did notice a familiar old man staring at him with an open mouth.

"L—lord Sunless?"

Sunny sighed internally.

"Oh. Hey there, Cronos."

The elderly teenager had been following them around when they toured the city, full of endless curiosity. He was a nice kid… no matter how hard it was to call a man who looked as old as Professor

Obel a kid… but if there was one thing Sunny had an allergy to, it was curious people. So, he felt uncomfortable around the wrinkly Riverborn youth.

"Did… did you turn into a bird?"

Sunny stared at Cronos for a moment, then shrugged.

"Yes. In a manner of speaking, I did."

The old man stared at him with amazement.

"Ah, I see! It's like that time you turned into the river serpent! Is that your Aspect Ability?"

Sunny took a deep breath.

'Questions, questions…'

He had to remind himself how sad the kid's situation was. Not even because Cronos had turned into an old man before becoming an adult, but because he was starved for excitement and interesting things.

His whole life was limited to a city that would have been considered tiny in the waking world — and, worse than that, that city was the last one there was, with not even news of distant events ever reaching it.

Of course he was endlessly excited by the two unexpected visitors.

Sunny remained silent for a moment.

"To be precise, it's the result of combining all my Aspect Abilities to create a... a kind of battle art."

Cronos nodded a couple of times, showing that he understood, and said thoughtfully:

"Oh… I have no idea what you mean, Lord Sunless…"

Then, he smiled.

"Are you here to check on your ship?"

The crow Echo looked at the young man with disdain and flapped its wings impatiently.

"Horse! Horse!"

Sunny nodded.

"No… I'm here to feed my horse."

Chapter-1366: Terror of the Earth

The crow hopped on Sunny's shoulder, and they headed toward where Nightmare was hiding. Cronos, annoyingly, followed them with an excited smile.

That said, Sunny couldn't remain annoyed for long because of the worshipful gaze the old man was giving him.

"Lord Sunless… if I may ask…"

He rolled his eyes and sighed.

"What?"

Cronos hesitated for a moment.

"...What is a horse?"

That almost caused Sunny to stumble.

'What the hell… why does it sound like something I would say?'

He shrugged.

"It's a large animal that runs really well. People used to ride them to get around. Of course, my horse is no ordinary horse… he's a real menace, that beast."

The old man frowned in contemplation.

"But why wouldn't they just use a boat?"

Sunny suppressed the desire to grind his teeth and answered in an even tone:

"The world outside the Tomb is not all water, remember? Most people live on land. Horses are land animals."

Cronos looked into the distance, confusion written all over his face.

"Ah… I see, I see. Are there no land boats? That seems strange!"

The barrage of questions continued.

By the time they reached the deep shadows where Nightmare was hiding, Sunny felt a bit tired.

"...yes, earth does sometimes shake, spew fire, and swallow entire towns. Not too often, though. Mostly when a volcano erupts… oh, a volcano is just a fire-breathing mountain. And a mountain is basically a big sharp rock, tall enough to reach the clouds. There's ice and snow on top, but not enough air to breathe… well, rather there's plenty of air, but you can't breathe it without dying…"

The old man's eyes grew wide.

"How bizarre! I would never want to live on land… it sounds terrifying…"

Sunny stared at him wildly.

'What the hell do you mean, terrifying?! You live on an endless river that falls into a bottomless abyss, plagued by roving time storms and Defiled monsters from the future!'

He shook his head, then said in a stifled voice:

"Nightmare, come out."

Two scarlet flames ignited in the darkness, and the shadows surged, forming into the shape of a dreadful black steed. Light glistened on Nightmare's steel fangs and sharp horns, tinted red by the blazing sunset.

Cronos yelped.

"Ah! A… a horse!"

His wrinkly face grew pale, and he took a couple steps back.

"M—my Lord… you didn't tell me that horses are such terrifying beasts! Do land dwellers really r—ride them?"

Sunny looked at the youth vindictively, then felt bad about it. The kid was very old, after all… what if seeing Nightmare gave him a heart attack?

He hesitated for a moment, then patted Cronos on the shoulder.

"Yes. But as I said, Nightmare is not your usual horse. He is an ancient shadow creature that used to serve an immortal Transcendent before becoming mine. Now… let's feed him."

As Sunny threw an excited glance at the black steed and summoned the nacre ornament, the old man asked in a shaking voice:

"But… what does this dreadful beast even eat? You… you don't seem to have any meat with you?"

Consumed by thoughts of Nightmare's Ascension, Sunny smiled absentmindedly.

"Oh, don't worry… I have what I need to satiate his hunger right here, with me…"

Surprised that Cronos suddenly took a few more steps back, he gave the old man a strange look and offered the ornament to the dark destrier.

"Here, buddy. Sorry it took me so long."

Nightmare snorted quietly, then brought his snout to his hand and pushed it, throwing the Memory to the ground. Then, he crushed it with one strike of his adamantine hoof.

A whirlwind of sparks rose from the crushed ornament and separated into six streams, each flowing into one of the dark embers burning within the shadow that served Nightmare as a soul.

'Here we go… finally!'

Sunny had always been preoccupied with raising the power of Saint — his primary battle Shadow — as much as possible, so he had neglected the black steed a little. It was not without a reason, of course. Nightmare's main purpose was not to be a destructive force in combat. He was a loyal steed first and a fighter second.

The utility he offered Sunny was much more valuable than an additional combatant would be.

Still… this moment had been a long time coming.

As the streams of sparks were absorbed into the darkness hiding inside Nightmare, his silhouette suddenly grew vague. Then, the destrier disappeared.

Already expecting that to happen, Sunny dove into his Soul Sea. Appearing in the lightless silence, he saw his Shadow standing on the surface of the still water. Nightmare had lowered his head, his body trembling slightly.

'Yes!'

Within the Shadow, the glow of the six dim embers was growing more and more intense. The water suddenly surged, as if assaulted by an invisible wind. Wisps of black flame rose from Nightmare's sable coat, soon shrouding his figure completely.

Sunny had already seen a Shadow rise to a new Rank several times. He knew that the transformation would not take long — unlike evolving to a new Class, this change was only going to take several minutes.

He waited patiently.

As if feeling the importance of what was happening somewhere near, but away from their eyes, both Crow Crow and Cronos remained silent.

…Soon, the transformation was over.

The restless waters grew still once again, and the black flames receded. Nightmare was revealed from within their veil, as fearsome

as ever. His outward appearance did not change much. Only the red glow of his ferocious eyes seemed brighter.

Despite that…

His tenebrous silhouette brimmed with a new kind of power.

Sunny grinned.

'An Ascended Terror…'

His steed was as powerful as the creature that Nephis had slain at the top of the Crimson Spire now.

In fact, even Sunny, who possessed an extremely high level of mental resistance, felt a hint of dread grasping his heart when looking at the dark destrier.

'Wait… doesn't… doesn't his aura of fear seem too strong?'

Trying to suppress his excitement, Sunny forced himself to continue looking at Nightmare and summoned the runes.

In the next moment, his expression changed.

'What?! When… when did this happen?!'

The counter of the shadow fragments had been filled and emptied. Sunny knew that, of course.

However, what he had not expected to see…

Was that the counter of subjugated nightmares had been filled, as well.

The [Dream Curse], Nightmare's Terror Ability, was unlocked.

...Standing near Sunny, Cronos and the crow Echo exchanged a confused look. Why did Lord Sunless seem so excited?

The small bird tilted its head knowingly and cawed with a sense of superiority:

"Horse!"

Chapter-1367: Dream Curse

The runes shimmered in the darkness, surrounded by still silence.

Hypnotized by them, Sunny read greedily:

Shadow: Nightmare.

Shadow Rank: Ascended.

Shadow Class: Terror.

Shadow Fragments: [0/300].

He had known what to expect, but seeing the word "Ascended" still filled him with excitement. At any other time, Sunny would have lingered, enjoying the view of the changed runes, but he was much more interested in something else right now.

His gaze slid lower.

Shadow Description: [This beautiful steed was tamed by the treacherous Lost From Light in the depths of a harrowing dream. The two Shadows battled across countless nightmares, shattering them all apart; neither was willing to give up, so in the end, the nightmares did.]

Despite the excitement, memories of his dreadful battle with Nightmare made Sunny shiver.

Shadow Attributes: [Swift], [Dark Destrier], [Dreadlord], [Dreamwalker].

The Attributes were the same as before. His steed was swift, could travel through dreams, and grew stronger when feared or surrounded by shadows. Sunny's gaze finally settled on the string of runes that interested him the most…

Shadow Abilities: [Flowing Shadow], [Mantle of Fear], [Nightmare], [Dream Curse].

His eyes widened slightly.

The first two Abilities had not changed. [Flowing Shadow] allowed Nightmare to move through shadows with stunning speed, as well as become one of them. [Mantle of Fear] was a powerful mental attack that induced terror in those affected by it.

The second two Abilities, though… the runes describing them were different.

'It happened faster than I thought…'

The [Nightmare] Ability shared its name with the black stallion. At this moment, its description read:

[Nightmare] Ability Description: "This Shadow can create and subjugate nightmares. The more nightmares serve it, the more powerful it grows, both inside and outside dreams.

Dormant nightmares: 287

Awakened nightmares: 252

Ascended nightmares: 455

Transcendent nightmares: 6"

Sunny's eyes glinted darkly.

'It's a thousand.'

Not only had Nightmare subjugated enough dreadful dreams to unlock his Terror Ability, but due to the nature of the carriers of the Nightmare Spell, most of these dreams were also much more powerful than expected — to the point where his rise in Rank did not make them obsolete.

The black stallion had even managed to find and defeat six nightmares belonging to Saints… or maybe Corrupted abominations.

Each and every one of the subjugated nightmares added a little to his power, just like absorbing shadow fragments did.

Much more importantly…

The last few runes, which had been lightless before, were finally glowing with ethereal light.

After accumulating an army of a thousand nightmares, his Shadow was finally a true Terror once again.

Trying to calm his wildly beating heart, Sunny concentrated on the newly awakened runes and read the description:

[Dream Curse] Ability Description: "This Shadow is a master of a lesser dream domain. It is capable of lulling living beings to sleep and imprisoning their souls in a labyrinth of nightmares. The souls destroyed within the nightmare maze feed the Shadow; the more powerful the Shadow grows, the faster and further the dream curse spreads."

Sunny stared at the runes, suddenly chilled to the bone.

"How curious…"

He was shaken so much that he uttered those words aloud.

"Curious? What are you referring to, Lord Sunless? Did your horse not like the food? It smashed it with a hoof! Uh… I'm sorry to say this, my lord… but you might not know what beasts like to eat. That was a shell ornament, after all.

Who would want to eat a piece of shell? You should try fish next time!"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then turned his head and stared at Cronos wordlessly. The old man trembled.

'Right. He's still here.'

Leaving the Soul Sea, he concentrated fully on the real world and said evenly:

"I was referring to how similar an Ability of my steed is… to some other things. He did like the food. It was much more preferable than fish."

Cronos looked at him with doubt, but Sunny ignored the youth and turned away.

'Maze of nightmares…'

It was truly an insidious and dreadful Ability, one worthy of a Terror. Sunny could easily imagine the Dream Curse slowly spreading to swallow this entire city… people falling asleep one after another, until there was no one left awake. All of them dying, their souls devoured by the hungry Shadow.

He could also imagine the horror of their death.

…Sunny had experienced the dream maze himself, after all. What would have happened if he had broken down and given up? His soul would have been torn apart by the torment of endless nightmares, and his body would have turned into a hollow husk.

The most frightening part of it all was the measure of control Nightmare had over the dream labyrinth… and the fact that the more his victims were terrified by it, the stronger he would be.

There was a limit to the power of the Dream Curse, of course. After all, Sunny had broken free of it by destroying each and every one of the dreadful dreams. It had not spread to all the Kingdom of Hope, either, because its reach was limited by Nightmare's own strength… as an Awakened Terror, the dreadful steed could only influence one castle and its surroundings.

As an Ascended Terror, though, that reach would have become greater. Who knew how far the Dream Curse would be able to spread in the future?

…But all of that was not why Sunny felt cold. Why would he? The power of his Shadow was his own power.

Rather, he was shaken by the words the Spell used to describe the Dream Curse.

'A lesser dream domain…'

Didn't it sound like something he had encountered before?

For example, the Dreamscape. A vast illusion maintained by the Aspect of a certain Saint, where countless people could combat each other without the risk of injury. Awakened used the public arenas for training, but there were private ones established for the government forces and the Legacy clans, as well. There was even a version for mundane humans to enjoy.

Was Dreamscape a type of lesser dream domain, as well? That would certainly make sense.

There was another similar example, though…

Sunny trembled.

There was the Spell and its Nightmares. There was the Dream Realm itself.

If there were lesser dream domains, there had to be greater ones, too… as well as those above them.

If so…

The souls destroyed within his Shadow's dream maze were consumed, making the shadow stronger.

…What happened to the souls of those who died within Nightmares? Of those who died in the Dream Realm? Of those infected by the Spell?

Was the Spell feeding on the souls of everyone who carried it, and on the souls of everything those who carried it killed?

The thought was terrifying.

But still…

'It would make sense.'

Sunny lowered his gaze and stared at the fabric of Ananke's Mantle.

When an Awakened conjured a Memory, the Memory was manifested from their soul essence. What were the worlds within Nightmares manifested from?

He turned his head and observed Fallen Grace. Finally, his gaze settled on Cronos.

…And when the Nightmare was over, where did all the souls conjured into it by the Spell go?

Sunny had never seriously considered how the Spell operated, simply because it was so powerful as to seem omnipotent. If one assumed something to be omnipotent, they would not question how it worked. Simply because its workings were beyond the realms of logic and reason.

However, now, for the first time, he was starting to question if the Spell was truly free from the laws that governed the rest of mundane things. Perhaps its scale was just so great that mere mortals like him were not capable of perceiving it.

Or maybe he was wrong, and there was nothing in common between the principles of the Dream Curse and the Spell.

In any case…

'Instead of thinking about things that are beyond my understanding, I should concentrate on what is in front of me. My Ascended Terror of a steed… and the curse he commands. It will surely be of help in this cursed tomb. Especially since there's a mad bastard around who is fond of visiting other people's dreams…'

Chapter-1368: Setting Sail

Not long after the black stallion's Ascension, the day of their departure arrived. The weeks they had spent in Fallen Grace flew by fast… so fast, in fact, that Sunny was sad that they had felt so short.

It was nice, spending time with Nephis and Cassie again. Back in the waking world, there had always been invisible walls between them… the great clans, the war, the complicated feelings of the past, the dark promises of the future…

But Nightmares had a way of simplifying things. All of these matters had been made small and insignificant by the dire necessity to conquer the Seed, and so Sunny found himself enjoying the feeling of closeness he had not felt in a long time.

It was funny, really… ever since becoming a Sleeper, he had been told over and over again how dreadful and deadly Third Nightmares were. And there was truth to these rumors, of course — after all, Sunny had already been forced to battle a damned Great Beast to survive here. But, strangely, most of his time in the Tomb of Ariel had been rather peaceful.

He had a feeling that peaceful days would become a thing of the past very soon, though.

From today onward, theirs was a straight path. First to the dangerous waters where Effie and Jet were marooned. Then, to the mysterious city of Twilight, to find Kai and Mordret.

And finally to Verge, the throne of the Defilement. To burn it down and conquer the Nightmare.

Of course, the Chain Breaker was going to return to Fallen Grace between each step to resupply, receive repairs, and give its crew an opportunity to recover. But those stops would be brief and far

between.

For the remainder of the Nightmare, Sunny and his companions would be going from one dire battle to another.

Looking at the dreamlike view of the last city of the River People from the height of the temple's tower, Sunny sighed and looked at Cassie and Nephis. The suns had just risen, and the whole world was drowned in countless shades of red. Illuminated by the crimson blaze, both of them looked solemn… and ready.

He lingered for a moment, then asked:

"Is it time?"

Cassie nodded slowly.

"It's time. Let's go."

Together, they descended from the tower, passed the grand hall of the temple, and walked outside. The blind girl's guards were following them from behind, just like always… but today, many more people had come to bid their sybil farewell.

Soldiers, artisans, and citizens of all kinds. Thousands of gaunt old men and women were crowding the streets, looking at the beautiful young woman with golden shackles wrapped around her wrists. Their frail figures and wrinkly faces were like a sea. Their eyes…

Sunny did not know how to describe the emotion that shone in them. Was it pride? Sorrow? Fear? Love? Guilt?

Or all of it, fused together?

Human beings were not that simple, after all. They rarely felt only one thing. Most of the time, their hearts were an irrational and contradictory mess of clashing and conflicting emotions.

'Will we manage to save these people? Or are they all doomed?'

Sunny knew that this was not the real Fallen Grace… and yet, he also knew that the shadows of living beings he killed in the Nightmares

were still within his soul, indistinguishable from the shadows that belonged to the inhabitants of both the Dream Realm and the waking world.

So what exactly was the difference?

They passed through the crowded streets and approached the piers. The Chain Breaker rested on the water, freshly repaired and refurbished. Its tattered sails were replaced by new ones, each of a gorgeous, vibrant scarlet color.

There wasn't much ceremony. Sunny, Cassie, and Nephis climbed aboard. The two deaf guards remained on the pier.

…But before they left, Cassie turned to the crowd of elderly Riverborn and smiled.

Her smile was like a ray of pure sunlight in this land of eternal dusk.

"My people…"

Her voice echoed above the water, reaching far and wide. The inhabitants of Fallen Grace — the last humans in the Tomb of Ariel — listened with rapt attention, catching every word.

Sunny gazed at the crowd and soon noticed a familiar figure. Cronos was also here, looking at the graceful ship with awe and longing.

Cassie waited for a moment, then continued:

"I have to apologize! Usually, I would have taken you all to the House of Parting to celebrate and enjoy a delicious feast. Sadly… the Lower House is no more, and so, I have no food to offer."

A wave of murmurs rose from the crowd as many people chuckled.

Someone yelled:

"It's alright, my Lady! Feed us when you return!"

The blind girl remained motionless for a few moments.

"...Still, today is not a day for sadness. It is a day for celebration. This journey I am leaving on is not my last. Instead, it is the beginning of a new era… a better era. An era of grace and freedom."

She raised her hands… and pulled them apart, easily breaking the golden chain.

The shattered links fell into the water.

Cassie smiled again.

"Lady Changing Star, Lord Sunless, and I… we are leaving to gather powerful Outsiders and vanquish the Defilement, once and for all. Our victory is assured. I know!"

It would have been an empty proclamation if anyone else had said it. However, for the people of Fallen Grace, Cassie was Dusk, the last sybil… the oracle who had guided their people for many generations, and who knew the secrets of both the past and the future.

Hearing her, they stared with wide eyes. In the next moment, a joyous roar rose from the crowd.

"Our Lady knows!"

"She saw it!"

"Victory! Our victory is assured!"

Staring at the celebrating old men, their sorrow gone, Sunny leaned slightly and asked in a whisper:

"You know? Did you receive a vision of fate?"

Cassie froze, then shuddered slightly. A moment later, she turned to him, her smile turning brittle.

Her beautiful blue eyes were shining with the reflection of the crimson sky.

She lingered for a bit, then answered:

"Who cares about fate? If fate is against us… we'll break it."

Sunny stared at her, befuddled. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Do you think it's easy to break fate?"

The blind girl lowered her head slightly and turned back to the crowd.

…Her quiet answer was almost drowned out by the joyous cries:

"No, it's not easy. It's not easy at all."

Soon, the sails of the Chain Breaker were filled with wind. The graceful vessel moved slowly, leaving the voices of the crowd behind.

The people of Fallen Grace watched as it sailed away, waving and wishing their lady good fortune in the days to come.

But then, they disappeared from view, obscured by the crimson haze.

There was nothing but a vast expanse of water left in front of them.

The first of the many battles was approaching.

Chapter-1369: Lost Library

Their first goal was to find Jet and Effie. Cassie had been able to determine the general area where they were marooned, but not why… she was also not sure what dangers awaited the Chain Breaker in that hazardous region of the Great River.

However, she did have a lead.

The problem was that this lead was buried in one of the lost temples of Fallen Grace — the palace where a Defiled sybil had once been entombed alive. During the battle for the city, the temple had been unsealed, and the island-ships that could not be saved were abandoned.

Cut free, they had been left to the currents. The rest of the flotilla fled upstream, where it remained to this day… nevertheless, the Chain Breaker was moving into the past once more, searching for the lost districts.

Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie were going to find the lost temple, slay the Defiled sybil — if the creature was still dwelling there — and sift through the temple's library in search of information about the place Effie and Jet were trapped in.

Breathing heavily, Sunny leaned on the side of the ketch and cursed quietly. The ketch had been patched up and repaired, as well. With its masts dismantled and stored, it resembled a proper lifeboat. The craftsmen of Fallen Grace had also constructed an actual nest for it, with ropes and pulleys to lower the ketch into the water and hoist it back up again when needed.

Nephis was at the stern, controlling the ship, while Cassie was examining the damaged essence lines of the ancient vessel nearby.

Looking at her, he decided to rest for a few minutes and asked

somberly:

"Why wasn't that sybil killed after succumbing to the Defilement, anyway? Simply sealing the temple does not seem like a reliable solution. Especially since it seems to have been done in a hurry, with all the valuables remaining inside. Who just goes and loses an entire library?"

The blind girl was distracted from her thoughts and turned to him, her golden hair fluttering in the wind. She lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"I'm not really sure. It happened long before we entered the Nightmare, so… perhaps the people of Fallen Grace simply couldn't bring themselves to kill one of their sybils. You saw how conflicted they are about us. Perhaps sealing her inside and turning the temple into a mausoleum was simply safer."

She sighed and shook her head.

"I agree, though. It was a mistake. When I entered the Nightmare… we could have preserved the entire city if not for their misguided ways. There were two sybils left in Fallen Grace back then, and one of them had just succumbed to the Defilement. She was still new to her unholy powers, though. The battle was dreadful, but we could have won."

Her face turned dull.

"...It was not until the seal of the old temple came undone that disaster struck. Once that thing got out, there was no stopping it."

Sunny raised an eyebrow with a dubious expression.

"And yet you want us to seek her out?"

Cassie sighed, then smiled lightly.

"Well. I alone was not enough to both battle the creature and prevent the city from sinking. But the three of us together… that is a completely different story. I don't think we'll have too much of a problem dealing with her. If we do fail to take down a single Defiled,

there's no point in even trying to conquer the Nightmare, don't you think?"

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"I guess."

There was another reason why they wanted to slay the Defiled sybil, as well. The conflict of the Nightmare seemed to be connected to the fate of Fallen Grace, and of the River People civilization as a whole. The natural ending of this story was complete extinction — which was why Sunny and Nephis were determined to destroy Verge and save the last human city instead.

But simply eliminating the source of the Defilement was not enough. Right now, the people of Fallen Grace were doomed — for no other reason than that they were all too old and weak to have children. To ensure that a new generation of the River People could be born, the city had to return to its previous position downstream.

Which was impossible because of the lingering presence of the Defiled sybil.

So, the creature had to go.

Sunny looked at the crimson sky, then asked:

"How does it work, anyway? Why was the entombed sybil so much more powerful than the one you killed?"

Cassie remained silent for a bit before answering.

"Simple, really. All the Nightmare Creatures we met before entering the Tomb had been corrupted countless years ago. There was barely a trace of their previous selves left. Corruption… is a gradual process, as it turns out. The sybil I killed had not been an abomination for more than a week. She was still mostly human.

The other, though… had spent a long time sealed in that temple. The thing that broke free from it could barely be called a human. Its powers were greater, and it was much more used to them, as well."

Sunny sighed. It made sense.

With his curiosity satisfied, he decided that it was time to get back to the arduous practice. He was trying to master the sorcery of Names.

Sadly… Sunny was making zero progress.

Learning the Names themselves was not too hard, at least not the simple ones Nephis had done her best to teach him. Even though those Names were eerily odd, barely fitting into his mind and constantly fading from his memory, he possessed enough mental discipline to hold on to the knowledge of them.

The problem was actually trying to speak them. In that regard, Sunny was failing miserably. It was as Ananke had said… people needed an innate talent to master the Words. And it seemed that he severely lacked it.

'Curse it.'

Perhaps Sunny was being greedy by wishing to learn an entire new system of sorcery, but he still wanted to master the fundamentals of Shaping.

Today, his attempts to summon the wind were going even worse than usual. He was tired and drained, but there was no result whatsoever.

"Damned wind! Come on, blow!"

When Sunny's irritation reached a boiling point, Cassie suddenly straightened and turned her head slightly. There was a frown on her face.

"...Something is wrong."

Chapter-1370: Insidious Adversary

Sunny sighed heavily, then subtly studied the world through his shadows. There was no danger around them. Everything seemed fine.

That said, his intuition was indeed telling him… something. It was not exactly ringing an alarm, but there was an eerie sensation at the back of his mind.

He rose to his feet and studied the Great River with his own two eyes.

After a few moments, Sunny asked:

"What is it? I don't see anything."

Cassie did not move, her frown deepening. The waves rustled as they brushed against the hull of the ship. The sails rippled in the wind.

Raising a hand, she touched her cheek briefly, then said somberly:

"I feel… strange. As if I'm drunk."

Sunny stared at her wordlessly.

"Huh?"

The blind girl grimaced.

"It's like I'm seeing double. Only, of course, it's not my sight that is blurry. Rather, it's my Aspect Ability. The one that allows me to sense what will happen a few seconds into the future."

He remained silent for a few moments.

The shadows across the Chain Breaker moved, stirring.

"...So, what you're saying is that something is wrong with the future?"

Cassie hesitated a little.

"Or at least with my ability to perceive the future."

That was a rather terrifying thing to hear. Sunny looked around once more, noting how peaceful their surroundings looked. The sky was burning beautifully with countless shades of red, with not a cloud in sight. The surface of the flowing river was spotless, with nothing hiding beneath it.

And yet, there was something sinister happening to the world, unseen and imperceptible. If not for the keen senses of the oracle, none of them would have known that something was wrong.

"Let's go."

Taking Cassie by the wrist, Sunny guided her to the stern of the ship, where Nephis was holding the steering oar. He had not had to guide the blind girl in a long, long time… but now that her Aspect Ability was compromised, she must have been disoriented. Even if she was looking at the world through his eyes, that was not the same as perceiving it with her own senses.

'What the hell is happening in this damned Tomb…'

Soon, they arrived at the runic circle and told Nephis the news. She remained silent for a while, looking forward with a somber expression.

After a while, Neph nodded.

"I see. I felt that something was wrong, too."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"How?"

Even his faint premonition had only appeared because of his tenuous affinity to fate, which had been enhanced by Weaver's lineage. Sunny usually called these vague feelings his intuition, but it was not

exactly a sixth sense. It was actually a rudimentary ability to feel the tremors of the strings of fate.

What allowed Nephis to feel the wrongness, then?

She pointed to the sky.

"It's the suns. I am responsible for steering the ship, so I keep an eye on them for navigation. There's something strange happening, though… for the last hour or so, our course has been changing slightly. It's like we are being pulled toward something. But if we are, I don't know how. I don't think there are any forces exerting pressure on the ship or the current."

Sunny suddenly had a very, very bad premonition. His face turned grim.

They were on a hunt for a Defiled sybil, and Cassie's perception of the future was suddenly behaving strangely. More than that, the world itself was not working quite as it was supposed to.

'No, no. It can't be. Can it?'

Glancing at the blind girl, he asked evenly:

"Say, Cassie… that thing that broke free when the temple was unsealed. What exactly were her powers?"

Cassie hesitated for a moment.

"I am not sure. I did not get a proper look at her… all I remember is that all the soldiers I sent to stall her were torn to shreds in an instant, unable to land a single blow on her hide. Arrows and magic projectiles missed, enchantments failed. She was too dreadful of a creature for us to handle, especially while fighting the other sybil."

Her beautiful blue eyes glistened.

"...As soon as the second sybil died, I ordered everyone to retreat and disconnect the entire section of the city where the creature was raging. That was how we lost half of Fallen Grace."

Sunny inhaled deeply.

"But all the sybils had powers related to revelations, right? And revelations are a manifestation of extreme affinity to fate. That sybil was capable of sensing the future before becoming Corrupted…"

He gritted his teeth and shared a wild suspicion that was making him incredibly wary:

"...so is it possible that the abomination is now capable of affecting the future?"

Nephis looked at him strangely.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged.

"Let's say there's an ancient sybil… a Transcendent Outsider who comes from the time before the Doom War. She becomes Defiled and turns into a Nightmare Creature, then gets buried alive for countless years. In the end, she breaks free of her mausoleum and devours half a city's worth of human souls."

Sunny shook his head.

"And then, we three go searching for her. And just at that moment, Cassie's ability to perceive the future starts behaving weirdly, while our ship is inexplicably moving in a direction that it's not supposed to be moving.

Wouldn't you say that it's quite possible that this primordial horror of a Defiled abomination is more than likely to possess powers that have to do with affecting the flow of time… or at least the probability of things happening?"

Cassie and Nephis paled a little. After a while, the blind girl asked:

"That… that sounds too fantastical to be true. A power to change probability? Even if she is a tremendously powerful Corrupted abomination of unknown Class, that's a bit too much. Don't you think?"

Sunny shrugged.

"No, I don't. Too fantastical? We are inside a huge pyramid, sailing on an endless river that flows through time, suspended in the middle of a bottomless abyss. Oh, and it's all made from the corpse of an Unholy Titan. I don't think that there can even be something too fantastical, anymore."

He grimaced, then added in a stifled tone:

"As for how unimaginable a power that affects probability would be… aren't you forgetting something? I've been suffering from a similar kind of thing since before I became a Sleeper. Only, in my case, it's not me who is affecting probability… rather, improbable things have a way of pulling me toward them. In any case, the result is the same."

The three of them remained silent for a few moments. Then, Nephis said calmly:

"So what?"

Sunny blinked.

"So what? You are not wary of an enemy who can literally change the future as they see fit?"

She leaned back, then shrugged with indifference.

"There are obviously some limits to that power… if you're even right about its nature. Otherwise, we would have died from heart attacks or been hit by stray lightning already. Why don't we just go and kill that sybil, anyway? Do I need to remind you two that we also have the power to change the future?"

Sunny and Cassie were confused. The blind girl tilted her head a little and asked:

"...We do?"

Nephis nodded.

"Of course. If we go there and kill the abomination, that will be the future. We would have made it. Every action performed by every person in the world changes the future. That power is really not that unique. In fact, it's pretty universal."

He stared at her for a moment, then chuckled wryly.

'It's hard to argue...'

"The power to change the future, huh? Alright. Let's go and make a future where the abomination is dead, and we're alive. It's not like we know how to escape, anyway…"

Chapter-1371: Dark Garden

The Chain Breaker was sailing across the bloodred expanse of flowing water. Under the blazing crimson sky, no mystical force seemed to be influencing it… and yet, its course was being set by someone other than the person holding the steering oar.

The ship was being pulled toward the lost temple of Fallen Grace.

On its deck, three Masters were preparing for battle.

Sunny was stretching, his expression calm and focused. Not that Cassie and Nephis could see it — he had summoned Weaver's Mask a long time ago. In the battle against a corrupted oracle, it was both his best weapon and shield.

Cassie had summoned her armor and half-mask. The Quiet Dancer and a long dagger were resting in twin scabbards on her hips. Nephis was still wearing her white tunic, but there was a beautiful longsword in her hands now. Its hilt was black, with the symbol of a scarlet anvil being pierced by a sword etched into the pommel.

"How do we even fight an enemy who can influence the future?"

After Sunny asked the question, both he and Nephis turned to Cassie.

The blind girl frowned slightly.

"...How should I know?"

Who else would know but her?

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then said awkwardly:

"Wouldn't a person who can perceive the future know how to kill one of her kind best?"

The blind girl shifted, then turned to face him. After a short pause, she smiled faintly and asked:

"What, haven't you thought about how to kill someone like me before? A lot?"

He coughed.

"...Never crossed my mind."

Hearing him, Cassie laughed.

"It's like Nephis said, her power has to have a limit. Say she can alter the path of one arrow… then, hit her with two. If she can alter the path of a hundred arrows, hit her with a hundred and one."

Sunny nodded. Indeed, this was the method he had come up with when pondering how to deal with Cassie… purely out of academic curiosity, of course. Since she could perceive a few seconds into the future, the only way to defeat her was to either exhaust her essence or create a future that was inescapable. Then, knowing it would be of no help.

The same principle worked against someone with the power to alter the future, in theory. Assuming that the Defiled sybil could raise the probability of certain events happening, the key to defeating her would be creating a situation where all possible outcomes led to her death.

He sighed.

"So, the brute force approach… I hate it."

Nephis stared at him incredulously.

"Meaning that you like it?"

Sunny shook his head earnestly.

"No."

She hesitated for a few moments, then let out a quiet sigh.

"This mask… is confusing."

Was it? Sunny did not think that it was that confusing. All it did was reverse his Flaw, making it so that he could only tell lies. As it turned out, always lying was much more liberating than always telling the truth… that was because there were countless lies, but only one truth.

That said, he wouldn't want to live while always wearing Weaver's Mask. Lies might be liberating, but he did not think that a person who only deceived could be a part of a community… at least not in any kind of meaningful way.

And no one survived in the Dream Realm alone. But, much more importantly…

Being cursed to always tell the truth had landed him in hot water more than once, but looking back at his life up until now, Sunny clearly saw how it had benefited him, as well. Without the Flaw, he would have continued to lie and deceive, remaining isolated and untrusting.

The mindset that had saved his life countless times in the outskirts would have become the end of him in the perilous world of the Spell.

He would not have grown close to anyone, and would not have made precious friends. And that, most likely, would have led to him dying in some ditch, miserable and alone.

…Sunny still had plenty of chances to die in a ditch, but at least his death was not going to be quite as bitter.

'That's personal growth right there…'

Chuckling under his breath, he looked at the crimson sky.

Perhaps Ananke had been right. Only flawed things had a reason to improve… and thus, being flawed was the greatest source of growth.

What did it mean for the gods and the daemons, then?

Did the gods, who had been born flawless, create the universal law of

imperfection to fuel their own rise to power? If so, which god was it that had created such a cunning thing?

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then sighed and shook his head.

Who cared about these things? The gods were dead, anyway. And he was going to be dead, too, if the three of them failed to kill the Defiled sybil.

"I don't see anything."

Nephis raised an eyebrow, then suddenly tensed.

"Meaning you do see something…"

She turned and peered at the horizon.

There, a dark shape was slowly appearing from the scarlet glow.

A crooked temple was rising from the water, most of it hidden from view and drowned. Its walls, once white and beautiful, were covered by cracks and overgrown with moss. Dark vines were crawling up the broken facade like a burial shroud, blooming with beautiful black flowers.

The artificial island the temple had once stood upon was broken and partially submerged. What little of it remained above the waves was like a wild garden, its dark expanse brimming with thorns.

The sky itself seemed to dim as the Chain Breaker drew closer to the drifting derelict. The eerie sensation at the back of Sunny's mind grew stronger.

"Just relax. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

He threw a grim look at the Sin of Solace, then commanded the manifested shadows to lower the sails. At the same time, his own shadows moved, gliding across the deck toward their master.

Cassie unsheathed her rapier and dagger. Nephis silently raised her sword and rested its blade against her shoulder.

She remained silent for a while, then suddenly let out a long sigh and covered her face with a palm.

Sunny gave her a glance.

'Huh?'

"Wait… don't tell me that you're actually worried?"

Neph avoided looking at him, lingered for a bit, and shook her head.

"No… I'm just realizing… the meaning of everything Lord Mongrel said…"

Her voice sounded strangely aggrieved.

Was Sunny seeing things, or had her cheeks become slightly pink?

He stared for a bit, then coughed awkwardly.

"Ah, well… I meant every single word."

With that, he headed to the bow of the Chain Breaker.

Soon, the ship slowed down. Reaching the drowning island, it scraped gently against its surface and came to a halt. Just like before, everything seemed calm… there was no movement in the wild garden of black flowers, and no abominations lunging at them from inside the temple.

The breached walls stood precariously, gaping with ominous darkness.

It was as if something was inviting them to come inside.

Summoning his cursed sword, Sunny grimaced and jumped down, onto the sinister shore.

'Since we're invited, let's not make the host wait too long...'

Chapter-1372: Clearing a Path

A moment later, Cassie and Nephis landed behind him. The water splashed quietly as it licked the shore of the drowned island, the black vines glistening with crimson luster in the blaze of dusk. Apart from that gentle sound and the whispers of the wind, the dark garden was silent.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, extending his shadow sense outward. Eventually, he shook his head and said warily:

"There's movement."

Which meant that there was none.

The dark vines also did not seem to exude poisonous mist, and neither were their black flowers full of parasitic pollen. As far as Sunny could tell, the garden of thorns was entirely safe.

They were not taking any chances, though.

Taking a step forward, Nephis silently raised a hand. Wisps of white flame rose from her skin, and then suddenly shot forward in a rain of incandescent drops. As her eyes shone with incinerating radiance, the white drops fell on the vines and suddenly exploded into a roaring blaze.

Nephis stared at the dark garden with grim determination, and following her will, the flames spread with astonishing speed. Soon, the entire place was engulfed in fire. It crawled up the walls of the crooked temple, turning the magnificent edifice into a towering pyre… soon, the three of them found themselves standing in front of a sea of flames.

The black flowers dissolved into the white inferno. The slithering vines were obliterated from existence. The ancient stones cracked and

melted, revealing more of the dark interior of the lost temple.

Still, no abomination revealed itself from the depths of the burning garden.

Nephis let out a long sigh and closed her eyes for a moment. The furious radiance illuminating them from within dimmed, and then disappeared to reveal her pale complexion. At the same time, the raging flames were left without the will that had been pushing them forward. With no more fuel to burn, they grew smaller and were gradually extinguished.

The black garden had been turned into cinders and ash, while the walls of the drowned temple were cracked and blackened by soot. The path was clear.

Sunny had expected an ambush to spring until the last moment, but it seemed that there was indeed no danger here… at least on the surface. What waited in the depths of the temple, though? No one could tell.

He considered sending his shadows underground to explore, but decided against it. The more powerful enemies he faced, the more of them possessed means of sensing and harming intangible beings. The shadows were no different from parts of his soul, but lacked the protection of his Ascended body.

So, keeping them close when dealing with a powerful opponent was a wiser choice.

"Let's go."

Shielding her face from the heat, Cassie took a hesitant step forward. Sunny observed her for a moment, then followed.

Catching up to the blind girl, he asked:

"How are you feeling?"

She held tighter to the hilt of the Quiet Dancer and forced out a smile.

"...Better. It's just that I sense varied futures instead of a definite one here. It was disorienting at first, but not too difficult to get used to. I am long accustomed to perceiving the world from multiple points of view, after all. Still... I think I am going to have a huge headache when we're done..."

He nodded slowly. Sunny was no stranger to looking upon the world from several points of view — that was a natural state for him, considering the growing number of shadows he possessed. However, perceiving several seconds into not one, but a multitude of varied futures had to be terribly confusing.

He had always struggled to understand how it was exactly that Cassie managed to handle the mental strain of perceiving two different moments simultaneously, especially to such a degree that it aided her in combat instead of becoming a hindrance… not to mention that she remained blind in both of these different moments of time.

Humans were supremely adaptable creatures, but everything had a limit. Maybe it was because Sunny had been slow to realize how abnormal his own talents were that he rarely considered how exceptional his companions were, as well. Cassie was usually quiet and unassuming, so it was easy to overlook her inconspicuous, but exceptional mental prowess.

In truth, it was rather astounding.

Sunny glanced at the blind girl again and frowned slightly.

'It's alright for everyone else to overlook her, but why do I always make the same mistake? I should really know better.'

Perhaps it was because deep inside, he still saw Cassie as the helpless girl that had desperately needed his assistance on the Forgotten Shore. Both of them had changed drastically since then, but that first impression was so deeply ingrained that erasing it was simply too difficult.

If so…

Sunny wondered what image of him was ingrained deep inside

Cassie's heart. However, he only allowed his thoughts to wander for a brief moment.

They were in the enemy territory, after all. It was no time for idle thoughts.

"Do you even have to ask the question? The image of a deceitful, selfish scumbag who outright told Nephis that she was a fool for dragging dead weight around, and that it would be better for the two of you to leave the useless blind girl for dead. Oh, what? You think that Cassie really did not hear that conversation?"

Sunny threw a hateful glance at the Sin of Solace, who was walking a step behind with a contemptuous grin on his face.

…Did Cassie's shoulders tremble a little at the sound of the sword wraith's voice? He wasn't sure.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, but remained silent in the end. He didn't really want to answer, and didn't really know what to say.

There had indeed been a conversation like that, soon after their first meeting on the Forgotten Shore. The blind girl had been fast asleep back then, though… most likely.

She had never indicated otherwise.

"Stop."

At the sound of Cassie's voice, Sunny tensed up.

"What is it?"

Had she really heard the Sin of Solace?

The blind girl remained motionless for a moment, then took a step forward and leaned down. Her hand disappeared into the ash, and pulled out the singed remains of a crude spear from beneath it. Her face turned somber.

Dropping the spear back to the ground, she sighed and said darkly:

"...It's the Drowned."

Chapter-1373: Counting Echoes

The word hung in the air, both ominous and strangely familiar. Sunny frowned and studied the remains of the crude weapon. Finally, he asked:

"The Drowned? We have never met abominations like that."

Which, of course, meant that they had.

Nephis nodded.

"Yes. A group of them attacked the Chain Breaker once… Drowned Outcasts, that was what the Spell called them. They weren't too powerful, apart from the depth dweller that arrived with them."

Cassie shook her head somberly.

"The Outcasts are the dregs of their kind. Most Drowned are much more dangerous. They are… a special tribe of Nightmare Creatures here in Ariel's Tomb. No one really knows where they come from, but many believe that the Drowned were humans, once. They hunt in groups and herd true horrors of the depths to use as war beasts.

Most troublesome of all, all of them possess at least a rudimentary level of sentience… they follow strange rituals, too."

Nephis frowned.

"I'm sure we will manage. Unless there are titans or Great Ones among them, the three of us should be enough to deal with these Drowned."

The blind girl remained silent for a few moments.

"That is true. Although the trace of the Drowned is bad news, they're nothing we can't handle. I am concerned about what their presence

here represents, though."

She turned to face the ruined temple and gritted her teeth.

"These abominations are very territorial. They constantly battle with other Nightmare Creatures, and leave signs to avoid the waters where truly powerful foes dwell. The fact that the Drowned are here, on the island… means that they have accepted the sybil as their ruler."

Cassie paused, then added with a dark expression:

"Which means that she has become a Tyrant, at least. Only those have enough authority to make the Drowned submit to them."

Sunny let out a sigh.

'So… a Corrupted Tyrant, then.'

He had faced more powerful Nightmare Creatures… but only a handful. While a Corrupted Tyrant was not beyond their ability to slay, it was certainly not an easy foe to face. Especially on the creature's terms.

His voice sounded glum:

"How did she become a Tyrant, anyway? Wasn't she a Corrupted Beast first?"

Then again, Dusk of Fallen Grace had met him as a Terror. It was obvious that Nightmare Creatures could reach a greater Class than what they had started from, just like Saint could. That was a trait that all noble creatures — those that succumbed to Corruption and those who did not — shared.

And it seemed that corrupted humans shared that ability, as well. Not unlike how he, Nephis, and Mordret did.

Cassie shrugged.

"She was Defiled a long, long time ago. She also fed on the powerful warriors of Fallen Grace, and gods know what else since then. In any case, she won't be waiting for us alone. We must be prepared to fight

her entourage, as well."

Sunny smiled behind his mask.

"Too bad we don't have an entourage of our own."

As he said those words, two menacing figures stepped out from the shadows to stand by his side. One was a graceful knight in a suit of intricate onyx armor, the other was an infernal fiend forged out of black steel and broken blades.

A terrifying black steed rose from the ground behind them, crimson light reflecting from his adamantine horns and wolf-like fangs.

Cassie let out a quiet sigh, then summoned her Echoes, as well.

A whirlwind of white sparks formed into two humanoid figures. One was a woman wearing a red dress not unlike the one the blind girl wore, her face hidden by a veil. Sunny suddenly felt a chill run down his spine as he looked at the silent figure… why did it seem like there was something entirely inhuman hiding beneath the flowing red fabric?

When the Echo of the Defiled sybil moved, it was eerily too smooth… as though she was hovering above the ground or slithering like an eel instead of taking steps. He thought he saw a glimpse of a glistening black tentacle appearing for a split second from beneath the hem of her crimson skirt.

The most unnerving part, however, was her empty gaze. Sunny had never felt comfortable around human Echoes, and he did not feel comfortable around an Echo of a former human, either.

Cassie's second Echo was less disturbing, but just as curious.

It was a tall steel mannequin with four arms, each holding a sharp blade. The artificial Echo — an Ascended Monster — looked like a clockwork man. His movements were somewhat awkward, but possessed the distinctive sharpness of a trained fighter. Sunny was reminded of something when looking at the mannequin, as well.

The creature was vaguely similar in appearance to the steel mount

that Morgan rode sometimes. So, that Echo must have been created by the enchanters of Valor, too.

'I wonder how they do it… the complexity must be on an entirely different level…'

He was distracted from his thoughts by a disdainful grunt. Turning his head, Sunny glanced at Fiend with surprise. The steel ogre was staring down the clockwork swordsman with an obvious air of superiority. Was the fool sticking his chest out?

Under Sunny's dubious gaze, Fiend threw a furtive glance at Saint, and then stuck his chest out even further. His chin rose cockily.

…The taciturn knight, of course, remained utterly indifferent.

Realizing that she was not impressed, the infernal ogre deflated a little. Then, he stared at the steel Echo vindictively. His fiery eyes were burning with… hunger?

"Don't even think about it!"

Hearing Sunny's hiss, Fiend flinched and turned away from the clockwork swordsman with an innocent look, as if the thought of gobbling up Cassie's Echo out of spite never crossed his gluttonous mind.

'I can't believe it. This fool is really getting out of hand!'

Shaking his head, Sunny turned to Nephis. She was the only one of them who didn't have anything to summon… of course, that was only because Changing Star had always given the Echoes she earned away to someone else. Even now, two of Cassie's three had come from Neph.

It was a bit sad, though, for her to look like an impoverished noble when compared to Sunny and Cassie.

Feeling his gaze, Nephis shifted slightly and stared back.

"What?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No, nothing."

At that moment, the sword wraith laughed.

"Doesn't have anything to summon? Fool… why would she need to? She already has a mighty Shadow following her around, ready to satisfy her every whim. That's you. You're her Echo. So, in a way… Nephis has four, while Cassie has three.

You, on the other hand, don't even qualify to be compared to them."

The Sin of Solace paused, then added with a smile:

"Ah, don't forget that it was the blind traitor who turned you into an Echo, to begin with…"

Sunny's face twitched.

Cassie, meanwhile, scowled and started walking toward the temple.

"Come on. We should finish her off before night comes."

He gritted his teeth and followed, furious at the fact that the apparition's words had gotten to him.

Approaching the breach in the wall of the crooked temple, the small, but extremely powerful cohort of Masters, Shadows, and Echoes dove into the sinister darkness.

Chapter-1374: Drowned Temple

'Damned sword…'

Making his way into the ruined interior of the temple, Sunny was seething with dark emotions.

What did the Sin of Solace even want? One moment, he was fanning the flames of guilt Sunny might have felt about how he treated Cassie in the past. The next moment, the wraith was reminding him of what had happened, and of how cruelly she had betrayed his trust…

Well, it was perfectly clear what the apparition wanted. The bastard wanted to drive him mad.

And he was… Sunny was mad.

No matter how much he understood why Cassie had done what she did, and no matter how many times he told himself that her actions had ended up saving Rain from being killed by Nightmare Creatures, and him from dying in the Nightmare Desert or becoming Mordret's slave… no matter how many things they had gone through together after the Forgotten Shore and how much their relationship had improved and deepened…

At the bottom of it all, Sunny was still hurt, resentful, and angry at Cassie. While at the same time caring deeply about her.

It was a proper mess…

'What else is new?'

It had been for a while.

"This place… is not creepy at all."

Jumping down from a pile of rubble, Sunny landed in shallow water.

The interior of the lost temple was drowned both by stale water and darkness. Since the island-ship was tilted and partially submerged beneath the waves, the long corridors with high ceilings were tilted as well. The three of them had to walk awkwardly, stepping on the walls with one foot and the cracked floor with the other.

Not to mention that there was rubble everywhere, forcing them to jump or climb over the natural barricades obstructing their path.

If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that none of them was oppressed by the darkness. Sunny could see in it perfectly fine, Cassie did not need sight at all, while Nephis was capable of lighting her own path.

"I think he is trying to say that this place is really creepy."

Nephis looked at him and smiled with satisfaction, proud to have understood his meaning.

Sunny stared at her incredulously.

'...What? Why does she look so smug? It's really not that hard to understand!'

Neph was such a weirdo sometimes…

Shaking his head, he turned away and continued to make his way deeper into the temple. Cassie was walking at the front, protected by her Echoes. Nephis and Sunny were in the middle, with his Shadows following them from behind.

The layout of the temple seemed different from the one the blind girl had lived in, but she seemed to know the way.

They were moving deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of half-collapsed corridors. Sunny felt that they had descended far enough to be underwater by now… nevertheless, the ancient temple must have retained some structural integrity, considering that it was not fully flooded.

Their surroundings, however, were rather ominous.

It was not even because of the darkness, the stale water sloshing at their knees, and the eerie feeling of something influencing the future. It was because this place had served as a prison for the Defiled sybil for a long, long time before being cut from the rest of the city and ending up half-drowned.

From time to time, Sunny noticed strange marks on the cracked walls, as if someone had clawed at them in fury. Other times, there was dried blood smeared across the old stone. The whole temple seemed strange and sinister, like a ruin haunted by an unspeakable evil.

Of course, Sunny was not afraid of ghosts. He had slain enough ghosts to treat them with indifference.

What he was afraid of, however…

Were the sybils.

Even though Sunny did not want to admit it to himself, he still shuddered when remembering the cold despair of LO49, and the horror of facing its butcher in the depths of the ocean.

He had been with Naeve and Bloodwave back then. Today, he was with Nephis and Cassie.

…Even though the two of them were weaker than the champions of the House of Night on paper, Sunny somehow felt more reassured in the company of these two young women.

The three of them had survived far worse odds together.

'It's alright to be afraid.'

He was sure that he'll feel better after putting down another one of these Defiled oracles with his own two hands.

"We are getting closer."

Cassie's words were sobering.

Soon, they arrived in front of a huge, intricately engraved door. Its

wood was wet and rotten, with illegible runes covering the dark surface. Sunny suspected that these runes were a part of a sorcerous seal once… now, however, they were damaged beyond recognition and lifeless, devoid of any kind of power.

For a moment, he considered turning around and leaving the sinister temple the way he had come.

But of course, he wouldn't. The Defiled sybil had to die… both for the future of Fallen Grace and for the sake of Effie and Jet.

Sunny took a deep breath and wondered if his resolve to slay the abomination was the result of the creature manipulating the future, as well. Had she pulled forward only those of the possible futures where the three humans were adamant on arriving in front of the ancient door, with not a slither of hesitation in their minds?

The thought made him shiver.

'To hell with this!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny glared at the door, and then delivered a devastating kick to it.

Turning into a rain of rotten debris, the massive gate flew off its hinges and cluttered down, into the dark expanse of a partially flooded hall.

It was then that he felt it… a massive shadow stirring underwater, its slumber broken by the sound of the breaking door.

There were countless smaller shadows hiding in the darkness of the drowned hall, too. And at the far end of it, an especially elusive one. A harrowing specter that made his hair stand on end.

Sunny's entire attention was drawn to the enormous creature that had been sleeping in the heart of the lost temple, though.

Belatedly, he remembered Cassie's words:

"They hunt in groups… and herd true horrors of the depths to use as war beasts."

One such horror, it seemed, had somehow found its way into the inner sanctum of the Defiled sybil's tainted stronghold.

Chapter-1375: Spoiled for Choices

The dark surface of the water exploded, and a gargantuan shape rose from beneath it. Sunny struggled to contain his revulsion as he saw its grotesque form… the creature looked so appalling and alien that he did not even know how to describe it. It was as if a mass of slithering eels was wearing a messy cloak of tangled seaweed, its countless limbs ten times longer than its vague, slender body.

'How… how did it even manage to stay hidden?'

The great hall of the lost temple was flooded, but the water was not that deep. As the revolting depth dweller continued to reveal its twisted shape, the dark water boiled, and countless Drowned revealed their presence.

These ones were similar to the abominations that had attacked the Chain Breaker in the past, but also different.

Their bodies were humanoid, with powerful black tentacles instead of a pair of legs — however, instead of gaunt outcasts who were overgrown by barnacles, the true Drowned looked much more strong and fearsome. Their weapons were of much higher quality, and some even wore strange but durable armor made out of shell and bone.

The black eyes of the sentient Nightmare Creatures burned with bloodlust and malice.

'Damnation!'

Most of them were Corrupted Demons, while the few most powerful ones seemed to be Devils.

And then there was the sybil herself, of course. Sunny still couldn't

see her clearly.

By the standards of the waking world, the three of them were a truly formidable battle force. Sunny was pretty sure that he and Nephis were among the most powerful Ascended humans to have ever lived, with Cassie trailing not far behind them. They were accompanied by two Transcendent Devils, a Transcendent Beast, an Ascended Terror, and an Ascended Monster.

Their Memories were also empowered by a Supreme Memory, the Crown of Dawn.

Still, this battle was not going to be easy. It promised to be extremely perilous, in fact.

As Sunny's pupils narrowed, the time seemed to slow down. His mind entered the state of battle clarity, banishing all unnecessary thoughts. He lingered only for a moment, waiting for Nephis to make a decision…

Every battle force needed a commander, and for their cohort, the burden of command lay squarely on Changing Star's shoulders.

"I'll handle the depth dweller. Sunny, if you will… slaughter these Drowned. Cassie, you will have to occupy the sybil."

Sunny was already moving, the blade of the Sin of Solace slashing through the air. As he did, though, a transient thought entered his mind…

This was it. This was what he knew best. After the endless onslaught of bloody warfare Antarctica, he had thought that he was sick of and nauseated by battles, bloodshed, and violence. But after experiencing these strangely peaceful months in the Third Nightmare…

Had he secretly missed the dark splendor of combat?

'I'm really losing it, huh?'

Then, there was no more time to think.

The silence that had reigned in the flooded hall was torn apart and

obliterated. To his right, the darkness was suddenly vanquished by a furious explosion of radiant light. Sunny saw a glimpse of a silvery sword, and felt the entire temple tremble as the gargantuan depth dweller moved to meet it.

Nephis had wasted no time attacking the ancient abomination.

He had no doubt that she would keep the appalling creature busy. His role, however, was no less important — Sunny had to eliminate the Drowned and clear the path for Cassie to face the sybil.

'...Will she be alright?'

Suppressing his worry, he lunged forward.

Sunny was really spoiled in this battle. With the Crown of Twilight supplying him with an almost endless amount of essence in this place of eternal dusk, he did not have to be frugal with how to use it at all. The limits that had oppressed him during the entire Southern Campaign were gone… the only one that remained was mental capacity.

There was a lot he could do. Shadow Manifestation would allow him to, if not outright kill, then at least wound and stall many of the abominations. He could achieve something similar by controlling water with the help of the Serpent King's crown. While the hall was not spacious enough to warrant turning into the onyx serpent, he could still use Shadow Shell to assume the form of the shadowspawn.

He could also use Shadow Step to reign terror on the battlefield.

The problem was that his mind was not potent enough to handle all of these tasks at the same time… the enemies were also more powerful than any group he had faced in Antarctica. Corrupted Demons and Devils were not new enemies for him, but Sunny had never faced so many of them at the same time.

What made sentient abominations so dangerous was their intelligence, and the Drowned seemed more than smart enough to fight as a single force instead of a group of powerful, but uncoordinated creatures. Many of the strategies he had used to

slaughter weaker enemies were not going to work as effectively against them.

So, he chose to concentrate on two of the multitudes of tools available to him.

The first was the Crown of Twilight and the rudimentary control over water it gifted him. Although the great hall was not entirely flooded, it still gave an advantage to the Drowned, who could move with equal ease on land and in water. Terrain advantage was of utmost importance in any battle, so Sunny was going to try and turn the tables on his enemies.

The second was the Sin of Solace. Currently, all Memories Sunny had summoned were augmented by the Crown of Dawn — including his already fearsome jian. Its long jade blade was more than powerful enough to cut through both the Corrupted abominations and their armor, and therefore, augmenting his strength even further with Shadow Shell was simply unnecessary.

The best decision Sunny could make was to fully concentrate on his swordsmanship, cutting out all things except for those that were in service of it.

'Let's show them…'

Landing on a toppled column, he moved fluidly and delivered a lethal slash to the neck of an attacking abomination.

However…

From just that first strike, Sunny realized that this battle was going to be much more deadly than he had ever thought.

Chapter-1376: Fighting the Future

The Sin of Solace flashed through the air, moving with stunning speed. Considering how insidiously sharp the cursed blade was, there was no way for the Drowned to survive the strike… Sunny was so confident that he would see the abomination's head flying away in a rain of blood that he did not even slow down to consider other possibilities.

And yet, something entirely different happened.

He missed.

At the last moment, the Nightmare Creature lowered itself deeper into the water, and the jade sword whistled safely above its head.

'What…'

It had been a very long time since Sunny made such an egregious mistake. His swordsmanship was not flawless, since nothing really was. He was a lesser swordsman than Nephis was, true… but who wasn't? Compared to almost every other living human, Sunny was an absolute master. A seasoned warrior with enough talent, skill, and experience to be considered an actual sword saint.

He could accept that an enemy was more powerful than him. He could even accept that an enemy was more skilled than him — although exceedingly rare, there were a few of those.

What Sunny could not accept, however, was the fact that he missed a simple killing blow.

Something did not add up…

Before he could even try to understand what had happened, the Drowned was already near. Saved from assured decapitation, the creature pushed with its tentacles and flew forward as if shot from a cannon. The dark spear struck Sunny's unprotected chest and tossed him backwards.

"Argh!"

The blow was powerful enough to send a blinding flash of pain through his body. However, the spear of the Drowned Demon failed to pierce the black silk of his tunic or rip his marble skin.

'How did I miss?'

Sunny fell into the water — or rather, he would have. Instead, his body disappeared into the shadows and appeared a moment later behind the triumphant abomination. The Sin of Solace flashed again… and was blocked by the shaft of the dark spear.

It was of no help, though. The jade blade seemed to have passed through the ancient weapon unobstructed, then did the same with the abomination's armor, flesh, and bone. A moment later, a thin line appeared on the shaft of the dark spear, and it split into two halves.

The same happened to the Drowned, who had been cleanly and savagely cut in two.

[You have slain a Corrupted Demon, Drowned Warrior.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny heard the whispers of the Spell. But he was not celebrating.

Instead, a dark expression distorted the lines of his pale face for a brief, fleeting moment.

'...How did that thing block my strike?'

Sunny felt uneasy. Yes, the spear of the Corrupted abomination had failed to stop the cursed sword, but how had the Drowned managed to predict and block his sneak attack, in the first place?

No… it had not been quite like that.

Replaying the moment of the strike in his memory, Sunny realized that the Nightmare Creature had not possessed exalted battle skill or supernatural power of premonition. Instead, it had ended up in a perfect position to react in time due to sheer luck.

Just like it had ended up lowering itself to avoid being decapitated by sheer luck.

'Was it really luck, though?'

Sunny suddenly felt cold.

Was it luck, or was it that out of all possible outcomes, those that benefited the Nightmare Creatures the most had suddenly become the most probable to happen?

Was the damned sybil exerting its influence on the future to support her minions and obstruct her enemies?

If so…

He sensed the numerous shadows of the Drowned rushing to rip him apart, and shuddered.

'Curse it…'

For a moment, Sunny almost panicked. Fighting a swarm of Corrupted Demons was already deadly enough… but fighting against the future itself? How was he supposed to defeat that?

Then, however, his mind settled. There was a mutilated corpse of one of these demons floating in the water right in front of him, after all. He had defeated that one abomination… so, he was going to slaughter the rest in the same way. It was just going to be much, much harder.

If one strike failed to kill the enemy, he was going to deliver two.

If a hundred strikes failed to kill the enemy, he was going to deliver a hundred and one.

Everything that could go wrong was going to go wrong… but hadn't Sunny always lived by that principle, anyway? Considering his [Fated] Attribute, he was perhaps the one person in the two worlds who was perfectly suited to fight a battle like this.

Swiftly turning around, he brandished the Sin of Solace and jumped down from the toppled column… into the dark water.

Instead of plunging into it, however, Sunny landed on the slick surface as if it was solid. This feat wasn't too hard to accomplish by combining the [Feather of Truth] trait of his Shell with the [Royal Promise] enchantment of the Crown of Twilight. Without pausing even for a second, Sunny dashed forward, running across water as if it was land.

A part of his mind was preoccupied with controlling the treacherous surface under his feet to support his weight. The rest of his mind… was concentrated on murder.

Sunny allowed his focus to become shapeless, giving up on his preconceived notions of how combat was supposed to work. It was not easy to let go of deeply ingrained habits, but his mind was nothing if not adaptable.

Simultaneously, he made alterations to his battle approach.

Vertical and thrusting attacks were easier to avoid, so he had to favor horizontal ones. Any attack he would usually consider unavoidable could fail, so he had to always keep the possibility of failure in mind and create contingencies. The same went for defense… Sunny had to change his entire approach to keeping himself alive on the fly. There were countless other adjustments he had to make, as well.

But if anyone could do it, it was him… the master of Shadow Dance.

As another Drowned lunged at him, Sunny shifted his weight slightly and avoided the predatory spear. The Sin of Solace lashed out, somehow missing the abomination by a hair's breadth.

However, in the next moment, the Nightmare Creature still fell into the water with a severed neck. That was because Sunny calmly pulled

the jian back and sliced through the enemy's flesh while continuing the fluid motion.

Behind the fearsome mask, his lips twisted in a vicious grin.

'That works…'

The darkness of the flooded hall exploded into a cacophony of violence.

Chapter-1377: Battle in the Shallows

The ancient temple was quaking from the furious clash between the monstrous dweller of the depths and Nephis. Flashes of blinding white light and waves of incinerating heat tore the darkness apart, sending the deep shadows drowning the dark expanse of the flooded hall into a demented dance.

Sunny danced with the shadows like a specter of death.

Wreathed in a billowing black mantle, his figure had turned vague and elusive. He moved across the restless surface of the black water with stunning speed, no different from how he would have moved on solid ground. Sunny's attacks were lethal, unpredictable, and almost impossible to trace — it was as if he was nowhere and everywhere at once.

Due to his speed and the ability to step through shadows, it seemed that the dark figure wearing the fearsome black mask was in several places at the same time. So was the merciless blade of his jade longsword — hissing furiously as it cut everything in its path, the cursed jian cruelly reaped the lives of the Drowned.

Still… Sunny was struggling.

He was struggling enough to not want to admit it. Beneath the polished black wood of his mask, beads of sweat were rolling down his pale face. The Drowned were both powerful and dreadful adversaries… each of them was a Nightmare Creature strong enough to threaten the life of a Saint, let alone of a Master like him.

Their black tentacles allowed them to move at a speed that was no less stunning than his, and made their movements hard to predict. More than that, the tentacles were both supremely flexible and

mighty enough to crush enchanted stone with ease. Being caught in their vile embrace meant certain death.

The creatures possessed a pair of human hands, as well. They were insidiously cunning and wielded their weapons with devious skill… worse than that, the Drowned feared neither pain nor death. They knew only a dark and cold resolve to see the enemy fall.

A foe like that was the worst nightmare of an Awakened, especially when there were so many of them.

And that was without even considering the eerie power of the sybil who was twisting the future in favor of the abominations. It was because of her influence that Sunny felt like he was not even one mistake away from dying, but rather one step behind staying alive.

'D—damnation.'

It was hard… too hard. Sunny was overcome by a bizarre sensation. He knew for a fact that he was just as skilled as he had been before venturing into the flooded temple, but at the same time, it was as if he was back in the crimson labyrinth of the Forgotten Shore — unsure of his footing and ignorant of how to wield a sword.

The sense of control and clear understanding he had become accustomed to were gone, replaced by uncertainty. His attacks routinely missed the intended target, while the enemies appeared where he had not expected them to be. Sunny felt like he was stumbling blindly in the dark.

He was enduring, for now, by expecting failure and imbuing his battle style with as much fault tolerance as he could. Several of the Drowned were already dead, their severed bodies floating in the water, while he was still in one piece. But how long would that last?

…Luckily, Sunny wasn't alone.

He had powerful allies to rely on, as well.

Saint was the first to join him in the slaughter. Her graceful figure was surrounded by something much darker than the shadows populating the ancient temple. Jumping into the water, which

reached up to her waist, she slammed her round shield into an attacking Drowned Warrior, shattering his spear and bones.

Her dark blade moved lightlessly, severing a tentacle that was trying to wrap itself around her arm, and then plunging into the creature's neck.

A moment later, the taciturn knight lunged forward, a tall wave rising behind her. Augmented by one of Sunny's shadows and the Stifled Scream, Saint seemed more than capable of fighting in the water. Moving with the calm precision of a flawless battle machine, she descended on the Drowned like a deathly calamity.

Her ruby eyes blazed with indifferent menace.

Fiend was only a split second behind her. The infernal ogre was also empowered by one of Sunny's shadows… however, he had also been bestowed with a measure of Neph's flame. Unlike the taciturn knight, who could not be augmented by the flame because of her affinity to true darkness, the gluttonous Shadow seemed to benefit from it especially due to his affinity to fire.

The incinerating glow of his fierce eyes and terrifying maw, which was usually red, had turned pure white. It was as though an incandescent star was burning beneath the glossy black silver of his fearsome armor.

The training Fiend had been receiving from Saint was not wasted, either. His movements were not quite like those of a seasoned battle master, but still showed a chilling level of skill. Using his long arms and dagger-like claws, the steel devil tore into the flesh of the Drowned, gruesomely ripping them apart.

While the taciturn knight seemed to have been able to adjust to the eerie influence of the sybil due to her sublime mastery of combat, Fiend simply gave up on trying and chose to overpower the enemies with brute force instead. A barrage of blows rained on his polished black armor, but none of them were able to dent it yet, let alone pierce it.

When the infernal ogre found himself surrounded and in danger of

being pulled under the water, he simply used Shadow Step to escape and savagely attack the enemies from behind.

Just like Sunny's other two Shadows, Nightmare received the help of a shadow as well. The tenebrous stallion leaped high into the air and landed in the midst of the Drowned, using his fangs, horns, and hooves to crush and savage them. His sable coat was glistening in the bloody darkness, and the fearsome aura of dread emanating from him made the abominations sluggish.

The Drowned were a whole Rank above the dark destrier… but several Classes below him. Empowered by the shadow, the darkness shrouding the flooded hall, the fear of his enemies, and the army of nightmares residing in the lightless abyss that served him as a soul, the dreadful stallion was more than capable of holding his own in this fight.

That said, Nightmare was not a creature suited best for direct combat. He was mostly relying on his speed and agility to stay ahead of the enemy while savaging them with his attacks. It was also not easy for him to lull enemies of a higher Rank into slumber. While insidious and terribly destructive, his Dream Curse required time to infect its victims.

Nevertheless, it seemed that all the Drowned in the temple were suffering from the initial stages of its effect. It was as though they were all slightly drowsy, their movements lacking full force and precision. Nightmare was helping not only himself, but also everyone else fighting against the Defiled sybil and her minions.

Cassie's Echoes joined the battle, too.

The clockwork man jumped into the water, his movements both fluid and strangely jarring. The four blades held by the artificial Echo spun, slicing and dicing the flesh of the enemies. Most of the strikes were stopped by the armor of the Drowned Warriors, but not all of them. Dark blood flowed into the cold water.

The Echo of the Defiled Sybil attacked, as well. Slithering eel-like tendrils extended from beneath her red skirt, and the slender figure, which once seemed like a human, suddenly rose high above the

battlefield. Moving with terrifying speed, the creature lunged forward and grabbed one of the demons, raising the abomination above the water.

As soon as the Drowned Warrior peered into the Echo's eyes, his body convulsed. An indescribable sound escaped from the mouth of the demon, followed by a fountain of blood. A moment later, the lifeless body was tossed to the side like a rag doll, and the Echo was already moving to find the next victim.

The battle raged, making the water boil and shaking the ancient temple. Only two figures remained aloof and motionless in the flooded hall.

One was the Defiled sybil, who observed the bloodshed from a distance.

The other was Cassie, who was observing the sybil.

Chapter-1378: Graceful Blade

'Damn… that hurt…'

Sunny stumbled back, feeling his hand tremble. He was too slow and failed to avoid an attack… or rather, he was fast enough, but the attack still passed his defense, somehow. Knowing that it could deal serious damage, he had no choice but to block it with his forearm.

His fingers momentarily lost strength, and the hilt of the Sin of Solace slid from them. Luckily, he was holding the great jian with both hands, so it did not fall into the water. Still, losing the leverage prevented Sunny from delivering a truly powerful blow — the jade blade sliced through the Drowned Warrior, but the damage was not fatal.

The entire hall suddenly quaked, and pieces of debris fell from the ceiling. The water flooding the dark expanse surged, and a tall wave spread from where the depth dweller struck down, trying to crush Nephis with its entire weight.

Stepping on the wave, Sunny allowed it to move him out of the path of a jagged harpoon and lunged into another attack.

He had killed plenty of abominations already… but he had also taken a beating. Right now, the flooded hall was engulfed by violence. Sunny, Saint, Fiend, Nightmare, and the two Echoes were resisting the dreadful advance of the Drowned guardians while Nephis was fighting the gargantuan monstrosity.

Cassie… Cassie was still at the entrance to the hall, motionless. Her eyes were obscured by the silver mask, but it seemed as though she was looking directly at the Defiled sybil, ignoring the furious havoc of the battle separating them.

He gritted his teeth, worried.

Had Nephis made the right choice?

Sunny knew that she had. Out of the three of them, he was best suited to face a large group of enemies due his Aspect and his Shadows. Cassie had no combat Ability to help her fight the horror of the depths, which meant that Neph had to.

What the blind girl did have, though, was an Ability that could potentially counter the insidious power of the Defiled sybil. Unlike the depth dweller who possessed overwhelming physical might, the true ruler of the flooded temple mostly relied on mystical authority over the future. Cassie had a good chance of being able to face her.

So, while Neph's decision was not exactly right, it was the best one in this dire situation. She assigned each of them a role suiting their capabilities.

Still… the Defiled priestess was a Corrupted Tyrant. She was a creature of the same caliber as the Remnant of the Jade Queen — a dreadful beetle Saint Tyris had fought a bloody battle with in Antarctica. More than that, the sybil could potentially counter Cassie's Aspect instead of the Aspect countering her unholy powers.

Would Cassie really be able to survive facing an abomination like that?

Sunny was worried, worried…

'Why is she not doing anything? What…'

And just at that moment, Cassie finally moved.

Although the blind girl did not possess a combat Ability, she was still an Ascended with a fully saturated soul core. She was by no means weak or lacking physical prowess. When she dashed forward, her body was as fast as an arrow.

With her blonde hair dancing in the wind, Cassie leaped across the dark water and landed on the remains of a crumbled column. A Drowned Warrior immediately lunged at her, delivering a devastating thrust with a long spear.

The blind girl calmly pushed the spearhead aside with her dagger. It only deviated from its path by a few centimeters, but that was enough to miss Cassie's head by a hair's breadth.

At the same time, she took a step forward and lashed out with the Quiet Dancer, the tip of the slender rapier piercing the creature's eye with surgical precision. The kill was instant, and gave the impression of being effortless.

Before the body of the Drowned even had time to topple, the blind girl was already moving forward. She danced between the attacking abominations, elusive like a ghost. Her movements were swift, but not hurried… they even seem a little slow. It was just that she was never where the enemy weapon's struck, while her dagger and rapier never seem to miss.

Every step she took was precise and calculated. Every blow she dealt was fatal. Every motion she made was perfectly efficient.

It was flawless.

Cassie gracefully moved across the battlefield, leaving several corpses in her wake. She did not seek out the Drowned to kill — instead, she avoided as many as she could, only crossing blades with those who barred her path. Even then, each clash ended in only one exchange.

Of course, she was able to do so because most of the abominations were distracted by Sunny, his Shadows, and the Echoes. The horror of the depths, meanwhile, was tied down by Nephis.

Nevertheless, her swift and seemingly effortless advance looked eerily... inevitable.

Before the Drowned could react and stop her, she was already past the mass of them. Pushing herself off a pile of rubble, Cassie soared high into the air and landed noiselessly on the raised dais where the Defiled sybil stood, observing the battle.

It was only then that Sunny got a good look at the Corrupted Tyrant, as if a veil obscuring her had been lifted.

The sybil… was vaguely humanoid, if just barely. Her towering body

was gaunt and appalling, covered by the remains of a rotten crimson dress. Her moist skin was like tar, pitch-black and glossy. Her limbs had been transformed into sprawling tentacles, while her head had become bestial and terrifying, split apart by a wide maw.

Sunny couldn't quite believe that this creature had been human once.

The Defiled sybil and Cassie froze, separated by no more than a dozen meters. The Tyrant towered above the delicate young woman, who was like a red flower blooming in front of a mass of abyssal darkness.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw that the blind girl failed to capitalize on the momentum of her advance and attack before the Tyrant could react.

'Why is she?!...'

In that moment, however, the sybil's terrifying maw opened.

Sunny had expected to hear a deafening roar, but what came out of the creature's maw was a deep, rumbling, inhuman groan instead.

"Daaahssssssk…"

Hearing that voice, Cassie sighed quietly… and lowered her weapons.

Chapter-1379: A Step Forward

'What the hell is she doing?!'

Sunny dodged a fearsome attack, feeling the wind raised by the abomination's spear throw his hair into disarray. As a chill crept up his spine, he sidestepped a black tentacle that insidiously shot at him from beneath the water, and prepared to dive into the shadows to come to Cassie's aid.

However, he did not get a chance to.

Right at that moment, the water which he had been using for footing suddenly tore free of his control. With no time to react, Sunny plunged into its cold embrace. This section of the dark hall was not flooded too terribly, but still, a moment later he was submerged up to his chest.

'Curse it…'

Sunny did not have to look around to know what had happened. One of the Corrupted Devils leading the Drowned was targeting him, using some profane power to wrestle the dark waters from his control. He did not possess a Domain yet, after all, so whatever connection to the element the Crown of Twilight provided him with was weak and rudimentary.

The situation was not good. Currently, Sunny was only augmented by a couple of his five shadows and some of Neph's flame. Because of the synergy between the two, he was much stronger than he would have been otherwise — enough so to push his body through water with sufficient speed.

But not enough speed to keep the same frantic cadence of combat.

'That Devil has to die, fast…'

Distracted by his own predicament, he had to delay joining Cassie in the battle against the sybil.

…Up on the dais overseeing the flooded hall, meanwhile, the Defiled creature and the blind seer continued to stand opposite of each other without movement. Only the sybil's appalling tentacles were swaying subtly, her monstrous figure reflected in the polished metal of Cassie's light cuirass.

Despite their inaction, the air between the two was swelling with an invisible tension. It was as though something utterly dark and dreadful was seething, unseen, beneath the fabric of the world, ready to explode and engulf the expanse of the flooded hall.

Cassie stood with her weapons lowered, her silver mask directed straight at the Defiled monstrosity. Her beautiful face was slowly growing paler and paler… but its expression remained calm and resolute.

Despite her body remaining motionless like an ice sculpture, her mind was in a state of utter havoc.

It was because she was using her Awakened Ability to its utter limit, well past it even. If Sunny was capable of reading thoughts, he would have known that the blind girl was in a state of absolute, pristine battle clarity. Time moved slowly for her, and a thousand thoughts were being born in her head each second.

Cassie was sensing the future… or rather, a multitude of futures.

Usually, she was able to perceive a few seconds into it. By activating her Awakened Ability, Cassie could enter a state similar to existing in two separate moments of time — one current, the other approaching. If she stumbled in the approaching moment, she could correct her steps and avoid falling when it became the current one.

Of course, such a way of existing was incredibly strange, disorienting, and mentally straining. It had taken her a long time to not only master this perplexing Ability, but also learn how to make use of it flawlessly.

Here in the flooded temple, however, the heavy comfort of her Aspect had been disturbed.

Because of the bizarre influence the Defiled sybil was exerting on probability, turning it vague and chaotic, Cassie was torn between different versions of possible futures instead of one definite one. Instead of two moments in time, she existed in the present and in several fragmented variants of the approaching.

…Still, she had grown used to it, too.

An existence like this was arduous, but not impossible.

And now, she had to master and make use of it, as well.

'A step forward.'

In Cassie's mind, she took a swift step forward, and then dashed at the Defiled sybil with stunning speed. The Quiet Dancer flashed, diving under one of the deadly tentacles and aiming to hit the creature in a vital spot…

At the same time, it flashed to slice at the tentacle instead.

At the same time, the slender rapier was tossed aside, helpless.

At the same time, it sank into the abomination's flesh, but failed to do any serious damage.

And then…

Cassie stumbled, her attack missing the intended target. The dark tentacles wrapped around her entire body. Her bones shattered, ripping the flesh apart. She opened her mouth to scream in agony, only for a fountain of blood to flow out of it instead.

Death was not kind.

At the same time, the tentacle continued to move, ignoring the slender blade that had cut it. Its blow was so powerful that Cassie's skull split open, pieces of pink flesh and shards of bone falling into the dark water. She toppled to the cold stones like a broken doll.

The pain was harrowing, but swift.

At the same time, she felt something breaking through her armor, crushing her ribcage, ripping her heart and lungs into shreds, snapping her spine, and exiting from her back. Cassie's convulsing body was raised into the air and tossed aside, leaving a long bloody trail on the dais. The harrowing wound did not kill her instantly.

Drowning, she wished it had.

At the same time…

There was nothing in the future but terrible, inhuman, intolerable agony. Cassie was broken, torn apart, and drowned. The pain never ended.

But that was alright.

Thanks to her strange Ability, she had already survived dying ten thousand times. Every time she fought, she died countless times to emerge victorious from the fight. That was how she won.

…Back in the present, no more than a split second passed. She was still standing motionlessly, a calm expression on her face.

'A step to the left, then.'

In Cassie's mind, she took a swift step to the left…

Chapter-1380: Cage of Futures

In the darkness of the flooded temple, a second passed.

Sunny was still falling into the water.

During that second, Cassie had lost count of how many times her slender body was broken and mutilated by the monstrous sybil.

A thought was much faster than a blade, but it had the same effect on the future as an action. Every time she mentally changed her plan of action, the immediate future changed, as well — and currently, Cassie was thinking with stunning speed.

'A step to the right.'

'A step forward, high attack.'

'A step forward, low attack.'

'A half-step…'

She imagined a future and suffered the consequences, again and again. The sybil was too powerful, too sinister, too vile… but not insurmountably so.

Another moment passed, and finally, Cassie imagined the future where she did not die.

'Found it.'

In the approaching moment of time, she managed to evade the fury of harrowing tentacles unscathed and deliver a fatal strike. The Quiet Dancer whistled melodiously as she cut the air and plunged into the sybil's neck.

Cassie prepared to move…

But then, the fragmented future turned vague, disappearing.

Instead, there was more pain, more defeat, and more horror.

'Of course… thought so.'

She did not lose her composure because that was what she had been expecting. Cassie was not the only oracle in this temple, after all.

The sybil had just as much control over the future as she did… much more of it, even.

Just as Cassie finally found one path that led to her victory, the Defiled abomination destroyed it, pulling over other outcomes from the abyss of possibilities. Instantly, whatever chance the graceful young woman facing her had was gone.

Their unseen and motionless, but furious and chillingly violent battle continued.

Another second had already passed.

'Faster, faster…'

Cassie gritted her teeth, feeling her mind spinning feverishly. She had already found a path… knowing where to look, she would be able to find another one sooner. If the future was a battlefield, then she had just conquered a small part of it, gaining control of not only that single possibility, but also all possibilities similar to it. While simultaneously denying them to the enemy.

Now, all she had to do was to conquer the rest, until the sybil had no more futures to replace her death with.

'A half-step to the left, aim for the neck.'

'A jumping start, aim for the neck.'

'A half-step to the right, aim for the heart.'

A few more frozen seconds passed. The flooded hall quaked and groaned as dust and streams of water fell from its cracked ceiling.

The horror of the depths was shrieking as its flesh burned, long limbs lashing out madly to crush the hateful radiant. The Drowned were besieging Sunny and his Shadows, some of them dead, but much more still frenzied and full of bloodlust.

Cassie was standing motionlessly in front of the sybil.

In her mind, the futures where she lived, and the creature died, multiplied. With each one she found, finding the next one became slightly easier. But finding many was not enough… she had to have more, more. She had to have them all.

As her mind burned, spinning faster and faster, the abomination grew more furious, too. The influence it exerted on the future became much more oppressive and suffocating, forcefully drowning harmful futures and pulling beneficial ones to the surface.

And yet…

Despite that, Cassie was slowly usurping small areas of the invisible battlefield, one after another.

Although both the blind seer and the Defiled sybil remained still, as if frozen, the air between them was crackling with pressure. The darkness boiled, failing to contain the gruesome violence of their clash. It felt as if the stone surface of the dais would crack and shatter from the aftershocks of the ruthless confrontation…

But, of course, it did not. Because the countless futures where the battle was taking place never happened.

Cassie… was conquering these unborn futures.

The sybil was able to manipulate probability to make only those outcomes that benefited her come true, so Cassie had to disarm the creature. She had to surround her enemy with only those outcomes that ended in the enemy's death.

She had to make the future into a cage.

'A lunge, followed by a feint, followed by a sidestep, followed by a thrust.'

'A false lunge, release the Quiet Dancer, simultaneous thrust and flanking attack.'

'A step forward, release the Quiet Dancer, dagger parry turning into a slash, backstab.'

Cassie died, and died, and died, each death more gruesome than the previous one. But slowly, more and more fragments of the future she perceived allowed her to live. The sybil was surrounded more and more by the outcomes that ended in death.

Her cage was growing smaller.

And smaller.

And smaller.

And smaller still...

…Down in the water, Sunny used the convulsing body of the Corrupted Devil to push himself to the surface and shot into the air. Landing on a pile of rubble, he tossed the fiend's severed head at an approaching abomination and followed up with a strike of the Sin of Solace, piercing the creature's heart.

After that, he had a second to breathe.

Turning swiftly, Sunny looked at the dais where Cassie was facing the sybil. He was both surprised and intensely relieved to realize that neither of them had moved, still.

'Strange...'

Spreading his shadow sense through the battlefield, he allowed himself a split second to evaluate the situation. Nephis and the horror of the depths seemed to be in a stalemate… the abomination's body was too alien and vast for her to deal fatal damage to it, while the abomination itself was not smart enough to catch the supremely skilled and calculating human with a devastating strike.

His Shadows were in the middle of a furious battle. Neither Saint nor Fiend were seriously injured, although there were several dents on

the infernal ogre's armor. Nightmare had avoided being seriously wounded due to his speed and agility, for now, but there was already blood on the tenebrous stallion's sable coat.

The two Echoes were mostly intact, as well. The sybil was cruelly vivisecting a Drowned champion, while the four-armed mannequin had lost one of his four blades. The latter Echo was struggling…

'No choice.'

Sunny had to help Cassie, even if it meant abandoning the battle with the Drowned and throwing more pressure at his subordinates.

A moment later, he was already leaning to step through the shadows and appear on the dais…

But at that same moment, Cassie finally moved.

A split second before, she had been frozen like an ice sculpture, but then, abruptly, she was already in motion. Dashing forward with stunning speed, the blind girl danced between the surging tentacles, somehow avoiding each inescapable and lethal strike.

Before Sunny could even blink…

The blade of the Quiet Dancer flashed once, and Cassie was suddenly behind the monstrous Tyrant.

The sybil swayed slightly.

Her tentacles grew still.

Then, a thin stream of crimson blood flowed from a small hole in her neck.

As the invisible ripple spread through the flooded hall, the Defiled oracle swayed once more...

And toppled into the seething black water.

Chapter-1381: Cleaning Up

As soon as the sybil fell, it was as though an invisible ripple spread through the darkness of the flooded temple. Sunny did not see anything, nor did he sense the change… but the gnawing feeling of something being subtly wrong with the world was suddenly gone, allowing him to breathe freely.

'Cassie… killed her?'

Stunned, he froze for a split second. The grotesque body of the Defiled plunged into the water and disappeared beneath its dark surface. Sunny had no doubt that the creature would emerge from the restless depths to deliver its furious retribution the next moment… but the moment passed, and it had not.

The glossy black surface remained unbroken.

'She… did.'

Sunny was momentarily astounded. Yes, Nephis had chosen Cassie to face the sybil — but not to slay her. The blind girl had been meant to occupy the Defiled until one or both of them finished wiping out their share of enemies and reached the dais.

When had Cassie become so strong?

Although the sybil had been a Nightmare Creature who relied on her unholy powers more than on her physical might, a Corrupted Tyrant was still a Corrupted Tyrant. Killing an abomination like that was no small feat — quite the opposite, actually — let alone doing it in one strike. How many Masters were there who could boast the same? Were there any, even?

And yet, Cassie had not only killed her, but had also made it look effortless.

Sunny frowned, feeling a strange mix of unease and elation. Had she always been that lethal, or was it the result of the year she spent alone in the Third Nightmare?

He suddenly felt a hint of discomfort. It was as though… as though he did not know one of his closest companions nearly as well as he had thought.

Sunny quickly recovered from his brief reverie, though. The battle was still not over, and albeit victory was within grasp, all that separated him from death was one mistake.

Well… maybe one mistake and a half, thanks to Weaver's forbidden lineage and the Marble Shell.

Generously burning his nearly inexhaustible essence, he used the Crown of Twilight to call upon the water once again, and lunged at the next enemy.

The moment Sunny faced the powerful demon, he knew that the tide had changed. The Drowned were still just as powerful, sinister, and deadly… but the oppressive burden of the shifting future was gone. It had disappeared as soon as Cassie's rapier pierced the sybil's neck, ending her tyranny.

'Now we're talking…'

He forced himself to remain focused, refusing to relax… right, what madness was this? What kind of fool would relax when facing a swarm of Corrupted Demons? Even without the Defiled oracle, they were enough to slaughter a score of Masters.

These creatures were different from the usual minions Tyrants controlled, too. It was as Cassie had said… the Drowned were sentient and chose whom to serve, as opposed to being forced into servitude. Usually, Tyrants could only control minions of a lesser Rank, but since the Drowned had followed the Defiled sybil voluntarily, that rule was broken in the flooded temple.

'Don't get arrogant.'

The haughty shadow already had enough arrogance to outshine ten

vainglorious fools. Sunny really did not want to end up dead by following its example.

Stepping on water, he deflected a harpoon flying at him from the darkness with enough speed and force to put a projectile shot from a siege engine to shame. Then, Sunny shifted his weight and lashed out with the Sin of Solace, cleanly decapitating the nearest Drowned Warrior.

It felt different. Finally, he was once again in full control of both his actions and their outcomes. The confidence that Sunny had almost lost returned. Grinning behind the fearsome mask, he listened to the Spell whispering into his ear and disappeared into the shadows.

A moment later, a mass of black tentacles enveloped the empty space where he had been standing. Sunny, however, was already somewhere else, his jade sword reaping another life.

Not too far from him, Saint continued her silent slaughter. With nothing holding her back anymore, the graceful knight had turned even more lethal. Unlike Sunny and Fiend, she could not move through shadows, which put her at a dire risk of being surrounded — the Drowned were not much weaker than the taciturn Shadow, so being caught by their tentacles could very well mean the end of her.

However, Saint was too skilled and calculating to allow herself to be immobilized. She was a battle master, after all, which meant that any battlefield was her domain. Moving with deadly grace and murderous foresight, she controlled not just her sword, but also the very space around her. Everything that entered it was at her mercy.

Fiend, meanwhile, was wreaking havoc among the Drowned. The dull black silver of his metal body seemed to radiate heat, and surrounded by boiling vapor, the furious Shadow sliced through the abominations with his incinerating claws. The white radiance burning in his eyes and maw was tinted crimson by the flowing blood of his enemies.

The infernal ogre seemed to be enjoying himself quite a bit. This was his first battle after reaching maturity, and so, he was basking in his ferocious strength and his newly learned battle techniques. He also seemed very happy at the opportunity to show off in front of Saint.

…Not to mention that every abomination he killed was bound to become his dinner soon. Unlike everyone else in the flooded hall, Fiend was on cloud nine and living his best life.

The Echo of the sybil was gruesomely slaughtering the Drowned, followed by the damaged steel mannequin. The two of them were much less expressive than Sunny's Shadows, but also pulling their own weight.

Of course, all of them were having a much easier time of fighting the swarm of Corrupted Demons because their enemies were weakened by the dreadful powers of Nightmare.

The dark destrier was shrouded in darkness and terror, moving across the flooded hall as swiftly as a shadow. His adamantine fangs, horns, and hooves had broken and mutilated many abominations already, but judging by the menacing crimson glow of his eyes, the stallion's fury was nowhere near being satiated.

The battle was still perilous and dire…

But its outcome seemed more and more certain with every moment.

Chapter-1382: Long Time Coming

The breaking point of the battle happened when the massive body of the depth dweller finally collapsed into the boiling water. Many of the monstrous creature's limbs had been severed, its mantle of rotting seaweed had been devoured by flame, and the slithering mass of eels comprising its gaunt body had been charred, sliced open, and pierced through.

After a long and arduous fight, Nephis had finally killed the abominable giant.

By then, Sunny and his Shadows already sensed that the Drowned were wavering. Once Neph joined the fight against the demons, the scales swung in favor of the cohort drastically, and before too long, the last of the sinister creatures was slain.

Suddenly and without warning, the dark expanse of the flooded hall turned silent. The only thing Sunny could hear was the sound of water streaming through the cracks in the ceiling.

He looked up.

'This place is not going to collapse, is it?'

But then, suddenly, there was another sound. A ghastly, repulsive squelching of flesh being torn…

Spinning around, Sunny raised the Sin of Solace and prepared himself for the worst. But what he saw made his eyes narrow…

Having already climbed on top of the dead depth dweller, Fiend was enthusiastically tearing into the creature's repugnant flesh with his fangs. Feeling Sunny's gaze on him, the ogre looked up in confusion,

as if trying to ask:

What?

Pieces of disgusting, fleshy meat were still hanging from his maw.

'T—this… this bastard! He almost gave me a heart attack!'

Not receiving an answer, the steel devil shrugged and continued ravenously devouring the dead abomination. He was practically beaming with delight.

Sunny let out a long sigh.

'Well, whatever. The rascal deserves a reward.'

He was very satisfied with how Fiend had performed in the battle. It seemed that Sunny's efforts were paying off — the decision to only feed the gluttonous Shadow enchanted metals until his primary Attributes were set had turned him not only extremely durable, but also effortlessly lethal.

It was as though Fiend was made from both armor plates and steel blades, with infernal flames enhancing both the former and the latter. The steel ogre did not even need to use weapons, because he was a living weapon himself.

'...He's so gluttonous, though.'

At this point, Sunny was really not sure how much Fiend was going to have to eat to evolve once again. It was probably going to take veritable mountains of food. On the bright side, they never found themselves lacking terrible Nightmare Creatures to kill, so at least there was no risk of running short on meals.

'Yeah… I'm not sure that it's something to be happy about.'

Sunny studied his other two Shadows and dismissed Nightmare after a moment of thought. Although his dreadful steed was not wounded seriously, there were some wounds on his sable coat. It was better to let the black stallion heal now that there were not supposed to be any more enemies around.

At the same time, the two Echoes dissolved into a whirlwind of sparks — half of them white, half of them scarlet. The sybil seemed fine, but the blade mannequin was seriously damaged. It would be some time before Cassie would be able to summon the artificial swordsman again.

Sunny lingered a bit, then dismissed Weaver's Mask and took a deep breath. The stale air of the underground hall was pleasantly cool on his skin. He enjoyed it for a moment and headed for the raised dais.

Not long after, the three Masters were reunited on its slightly tilted surface.

Nephis looked perfectly fine… well, of course she did. Any wound she had received would have been healed by the white flames long ago. In fact, that was one of the most frightening things about Changing Star — unless someone managed to kill her both instantly and utterly, she could recover from almost anything.

Nevertheless, she looked terribly drained and exhausted. The same power that healed her wounds and burned her enemies to ash subjected Nephis to unspeakable agony, which was why she only used her Aspect when there was no other choice.

Cassie seemed untouched, too. But although she only delivered a few swift strikes throughout the entire battle, she somehow looked even more fatigued than Nephis.

It was as though she would collapse at any moment.

Sunny was suddenly worried.

"Uh… are you alright?"

The blind girl lingered for a few moments, then smiled faintly.

"Yes. It's just that… remember the headache I told you about? I'm feeling it now."

He frowned.

'Right. Although it all happened terribly fast, she must have overused

her Aspect Ability to be able to kill that thing.'

Sunny shook his head.

"Anyway… dispatching a Corrupted Tyrant in a single exchange. That was impressive. Since when are you so terrifying?"

Cassie faced him and suddenly laughed.

"I'll… take it as a compliment? If you don't mind."

Her laugh was bright and clear. She turned in the direction where the sybil had disappeared beneath the dark water and sighed.

"She was the enemy that cost me half of Fallen Grace. And all the lives that have been lost as a result of moving the city upstream. I've been preparing for this fight for a very long time, so… don't be too surprised."

Sunny coughed and looked away. The Defiled sybil had been a dangerous adversary to him… but to Cassie, she was something more. He knew all too well the shame of losing people you were responsible for to an overwhelming enemy.

'Good… it's good that Cassie got some payback.'

He hoped that he would be able to slaughter the Winter Beast one day, too.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, thinking if he should pat the blind girl on the back. Or maybe grip her shoulder. What was one supposed to do in these situations?

Before he could decide, though, Nephis took a few steps forward and took Cassie into a gentle embrace. She did not say anything, but there seemed to be no need for words.

The blind girl smiled.

"Thank you... anyway, the temple should be safe now. I don't think it will collapse any time soon, either. Still, we shouldn't linger. How about we rest a little, gather our spoils, and then do what we came

here to do?"

Sunny nodded. Accomplishing their goal as soon as possible sounded like a good plan.

…Gathering plentiful spoils sounded even better.

But the most enticing thing Cassie suggested, by far, was to rest.

"Great idea!"

Without wasting any time, Sunny plopped on the ground and summoned the Covetous Coffer...

Fiend was not the only one who had worked up quite an appetite during the tiresome battle.

Chapter-1383: A Pile of Soul Shards

Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie spent a while resting on the dais of the flooded hall. They were surrounded by the stench of blood and death, but none of them minded. It was too familiar of a smell, after all — most Awakened would not lose appetite because of it.

The three of them needed to refuel their exhausted bodies, regardless. Without speaking much, they consumed a hearty meal and spent some time catching their breaths. There was mental fatigue to deal with, as well — the mind was not as quick to recover from the strain of the battle as the body.

Sunny, it seemed, was in a better shape than Nephis and Cassie. After spending some time in a comfortable daze, his thoughts started to wander. Curious, he checked his runes.

'...No luck.'

Despite the large number of enemies he and his Shadows had slaughtered, there were no new Memories, not to mention Echoes. Sunny was not too discouraged, though — mostly because his shadow fragment counter was showing [1944/5000].

'I've... earned almost five hundred fragments in a single battle.'

That was a truly stunning amount. Sunny struggled to remember if he had ever earned that much, that fast… considering that the Nightmare promised to be quite intense from this point onward, there was a good chance that he would emerge from it as a Terror. Just six battles of similar scope would do the trick.

Of course, it was uncertain if he would survive the Nightmare at all. Still… every fragment he absorbed made him a tiny bit stronger. So,

earning hundreds of them in the span of a few minutes was a boon.

After a while, the three of them reluctantly got to work. By then, Fiend was mostly done with devouring the gargantuan corpse of the depth dweller — once again, Sunny was flabbergasted by how much meat could fit inside the gluttonous Shadow's bottomless belly. The monstrous abomination had been at least ten times larger than the steel devil, and yet, there was barely anything left of it.

'...Does he have some sort of an endless spatial storage instead of a stomach?'

Shaking his head, Sunny called both Fiend and Saint over. Then, the five of them started the gruesome job of recovering the soul shards from the Drowned.

After a while, they were back on the dais, sitting on the cold stones. All three humans had a somewhat strange look on their faces, their eyes reflecting the beautiful glow of a sizable pile of radiant crystals that lay between them. Unable to control himself, Sunny trembled.

'So… so… so much money!'

There were no less than three hundred Transcended soul shards in the pile. Three hundred! In the waking world, they would have sold for enough money to buy the entire terrace district where his home was located. Even then, he would be left with enough credits to… to…

'What do I even spend it on?'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then scratched his head.

"I don't know about you Great Legacies, but this just seems too extravagant. I knew that Third Nightmares were something else, but still..."

Cassie and Nephis turned to him. After a few moments of silence, the blind girl shook her head.

"No… that's a bit much even for us."

Clan Valor was rich beyond imagination, but its expenditures were equally enormous. It took a lot of resources to maintain an army of Awakened and keep a great citadel safe, while people who could slay Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were few and burdened with other responsibilities.

Sunny glanced at the mesmerizing pile of soul shards and sighed.

'Damn it… why, why can't I absorb shards?'

He remained silent for a while, then said in a stifled voice:

"Well… time's a wastin'. Come on, Neph. Chop-chop!"

She gave him a confused look.

"Huh?"

Sunny swallowed his tears and smiled.

"Cassie has already saturated her core, so you're the only one who can make use of these shards. Leave me a few for weaving, and absorb the rest."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments.

"But I only killed the depth dweller and a dozen Drowned. You and Cassie deserve these shards much more."

He shrugged.

"The sooner we make you a Titan, the better. I already received my share of fragments, anyway… plus, we're in the same boat. Quite literally. You said it yourself, too — individual strength is not all that. If there's anything we can do to increase the overall strength of the cohort, it has to be done."

Sunny leaned forward, picked up a shimmering crystal, and threw it to Nephis. Her gaze did not move, but her hand shot forward and caught it.

She hesitated for a bit, then sighed and crushed the soul shard. A

stream of white sparks then entered her body, surrounding it with radiance.

Before it dimmed, Nephis picked up another shard and absorbed it, as well. One, two, three, ten…

Trying very hard to keep bitter envy from showing on his face, Sunny observed the process from the sidelines. Belatedly, he realized that absorbing hundreds of shards was a very slow process.

With nothing else to do, he simply stared at the soft radiance surrounding Neph's slender figure.

After a while, a quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

'Pretty…'

Then, Sunny coughed.

'I mean, this mountain of wealth… can there be a prettier sight?! Too bad it's going to be all gone soon. Yeah…'

Forcing himself to look away, he glanced at Cassie. The blind girl seemed to have regained some of her liveliness, but she still looked unsteady. He summoned the Endless Spring and offered it to her.

Cassie must have been low on essence, because she didn't see his gesture. That probably meant that her Aspect Abilities were not activated, leaving her truly blind, just as she had been as a Sleeper.

Sunny lingered for a moment. Calling out to her, he gently grasped her wrist and placed the Memory into her palm.

"Here. Drink some water."

She held the Endless Spring for a bit, then brought her other hand closer and traced the shape of the beautiful glass bottle with her fingers. A subtle smile appeared on Cassie's lips.

Bringing the bottle to them, she took a few sips of the cool, refreshing water, and offered the Endless Spring back to Sunny.

"Thank you."

Dismissing the Memory, he remembered the past. The Endless Spring was one of the three Memories Cassie had earned in her First Nightmare. It had served them well on the Forgotten Shore, and was later gifted to Sunny by the blind girl.

The beautiful glass bottle had followed him on all his misadventures ever since, saving his life on several occasions.

…Looking back, it was quite a thoughtful gift.

"But don't you know why she gave it to you?"

Sunny flinched, looking up at the Sin of Solace. The sword wraith had appeared from the darkness at some point, unseen, and now stood above him with a cold expression.

"Not out of any kind of affection, of course. It was just something to dampen the torment of guilt she felt over betraying you. So, if anything, that gift of hers was quite self-indulgent. A person can't condemn a friend to death and want to feel good about themselves at the same time, you know. If they have any shame."

The apparition smiled.

"Hey. She never even apologized, did she?"

The Sin of Solace shook his head.

"So maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she has never had any shame, and has never felt guilty about stabbing you in the back, to begin with."

Sitting opposite Sunny, Cassie hugged her shoulders and lowered her head.

He gritted his teeth.

'Shut the hell up. Nobody asked for your opinion, wretch...'

As Nephis continued to absorb soul shards, the laughter of the odious wrath echoed in his ears.

Chapter-1384: Novel Idea

Eventually, Nephis was done with the pile of soul shards. Sunny stored a few of them inside the Covetous Coffer, then dismissed the alloy chest and rose, looking around the flooded hall.

Although the structure sustained some damage during the battle, it had not collapsed yet. He did not know how much longer the lost temple would last, though. The sight of numerous cracks covering the distant ceiling did not fill him with confidence.

'...It's not the end of the world.'

Sunny had to remind himself that even if the temple collapsed, the three of them would be just fine. They were Masters, not mundane people — it was just hard to remember the difference, sometimes. No one would be able to remain composed when there were countless tons of stone and cold water ready to fall on their heads.

"Shall we go?"

Nephis had finished absorbing the soul shards, and Fiend had finished stuffing his face with what remained of the Drowned. They had rested enough, as well… nothing was preventing them from exploring deeper into the temple.

Rising to her feet, Cassie nodded.

"Yeah. Let's go."

Nephis did a few stretches and brandished her sword in a flowing series of strikes, familiarizing herself with the subtle change of her physical power. Then, she followed the two of them to the far end of the flooded hall.

"What are we searching for, exactly?"

Cassie was looking at the cracked wall behind the dais, her expression glum. After a few moments of silence, she responded in a distant tone:

"This temple used to be dedicated to knowledge. The three sybils who ruled Fallen Grace each had different responsibilities, and this one, as the senior, was the guardian of truths. She oversaw a vast library where everything the sybils knew about the world was recorded. Many faithful priests and priestesses were responsible for keeping and expanding the library, as well."

The blind girl sighed.

"...Of course, most of that knowledge was lost when the sybil succumbed to the Defilement, and the rest had to have slowly deteriorated after her imprisonment. The recent water damage probably obliterated most of what was left. Still, there is a chance that we'll find hints of what to expect on our journey."

Finally, Cassie noticed a small door that was obscured by darkness, most of the narrow corridor it led to submerged underwater. Taking a step in that direction, she said:

"Among other things, the sybils kept detailed maps and records of the Great River here. Every city, every settlement, every stronghold of a powerful Seeker… from what I was able to learn, these maps were engraved on stone slates. They would not have been destroyed that easily. The information about the place where Effie and Soul Reaper are trapped should have been recorded, as well."

The geography of the Tomb of Ariel — or rather, of both the human settlements and the hazardous environments — was constantly shifting. Human cities migrated, while dangerous areas changed or moved. Considering the treacherous nature of the Great River, keeping maps was not too simple of a task.

That said, some places had a constant location. And even if it changed, the knowledge of how they had been in the past could help Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie learn what it was exactly that they would have to face.

'Great…'

Usually, Sunny would have preserved his essence, but since the battle was behind them, and he was being spoiled by the Crown of Twilight, he simply commanded the water to part instead of jumping into its cold embrace.

It took some effort for him to move so much of it, but a few seconds later, the flooded corridor was flooded no more. The three of them descended from the dais and entered through the small door, venturing into the very heart of the lost temple.

As they walked, Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit disturbed. There were much more signs of the sybil's rampage here, close to the inner sanctum. Even though the Defiled abomination was dead now, the marks she had left on the ancient walls remained as eerie and ominous as ever.

Cassie opened her mouth to say something, but remained silent in the end. A grim expression settled on her exquisite face. The bright glimmer of her beautiful eyes dimmed, replaced by somber darkness.

He frowned, worried that they should have given the blind girl more time to rest.

In the end, Sunny hurried his steps to catch up to her and asked:

"Are you alright?"

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then smiled faintly.

"Yes… sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

Then, she traced the frightening marks left on the wall by the fury of the imprisoned sybil.

"I was just thinking what it must have felt like, to be buried here alive. The people of Fallen Grace… they thought that they were showing mercy by not killing her. Or reverence and devotion, perhaps. But…"

She sighed and shook her head.

"Wouldn't it have been better to just die?"

Sunny lingered for a while, not knowing what to answer. It was just a curious question to him — but to Cassie, who had lived an entire year playing the role of a sybil, it had to be much more personal.

Eventually, he shrugged:

"I'd rather die, yes."

The blind girl smiled.

"Yeah. That just goes to show… that good intentions often produce the most cruel of results. Don't you think?"

When Sunny nodded, she paused for a moment, then suddenly added in a dark tone:

"However… personally, I disagree. I'd rather live, no matter what."

He looked at her with surprise, slightly confused by the contradiction.

"Why?"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments. It seemed as though she was considering his questions seriously.

Eventually, she chuckled:

"...Honestly, I'm not quite sure. Pride, maybe? The world is trying to kill us so hard. It just feels like such a shame, to let it have its way."

Sunny stared at her with an incredulous expression.

'What the hell?'

Wasn't it basically the same thing he had told Hero all those years ago, in the First Nightmare? It was like listening to a more refined and eloquent version of himself.

Was it such a surprise, though? Although he and Cassie came from entirely different backgrounds, they were more alike than anyone

would think… simply because they both shared an affinity to fate, and knew better than most how tyrannical fate was.

He kept quiet for a bit, then scoffed. Before Sunny could respond, though, Nephis spoke from behind them:

"Well, then, what's the problem? Just make sure not to die. There, problem solved."

He nodded with a grin.

"Exactly. I mean, it's not that hard… if a fool like me can stay alive, anyone can."

Cassie smiled, amused by their awkward attempts to raise her mood.

She nodded.

"Ah… alright. What a novel idea. I'll take it under advisement."

As the sound of quiet chuckling echoed in the dark corridor, the three Masters went deeper into the darkness of the ancient temple.

Chapter-1385: Flame of Divinity

As they walked through the corridors, Sunny kept clearing their way with the help of the Crown of Twilight. Of course, they could easily swim through the flooded portions of the temple — but why would they, if there was an easier way?

The walls of the narrow corridors glistened, reflecting the light of a luminous Memory Nephis had summoned. Soon, Sunny noticed a subtle change in them. If the ancient stone was unadorned before, now, it was covered by the remains of beautiful murals.

He couldn't quite understand what was depicted on them, though — partially because the murals were heavily damaged, partially because the images were quite strange. They were more symbolic than descriptive… at least that was the conclusion he made.

"...What's that?"

Noticing that Nephis seemed to be interested in the murals as well, Sunny finally gave voice to his curiosity.

She hesitated for a few moments, then shook her head.

"I'm not sure."

In front of them was an image depicting a vast black field that looked strangely terrifying. In the middle of it, a mass of golden flame was burning, illuminating the darkness with its radiance.

Cassie slowed her steps and turned slightly, facing the mural. After a moment of silence, she said matter-of-factly:

"It's the myth of creation."

The two of them looked at her with some confusion. Feeling their

gazes, the blind girl sighed, then smiled lightly.

"The inhabitants of the Dream Realm had a myth of how the world came to be, of course. Actually, many of them. Most shared common points, though."

She pointed to the mural.

"In the beginning, there was only the boundless void of chaos…"

Sunny tilted his head a little, remembering the description of a Memory he once possessed… the Memory of a drop of Shadow God's blood. The runes he had read told the same.

Of course, Cassie was slightly altering the meaning due to the difference between the language of the waking world and the runic language the Spell used. There was no void of chaos… because the words "void" and "chaos" meant the same thing.

Come to think of it, it had been the same in the human language once, as well. These days, when someone said "chaos", they wanted to describe some sort of a huge mess. But the initial meaning of that word simply meant emptiness… the void.

So, saying that there was only the void meant the same thing as saying there was only chaos.

It was the dark abyss that Weaver had apparently visited, and where the gods had come from.

Cassie, meanwhile, continued:

"The void was everlasting and everchanging. Terrible beings dwelled within the void, as well. But then came desire, and with it came direction."

She pointed to the golden flame.

Sunny raised his eyebrow. These last words were exactly the same as in the description of the drop of ichor.

"Yeah, I've heard something similar before. But, to be honest, I never

really understood what all of it actually means. Desire, direction… why are they so significant?"

It was Nephis, not Cassie, who answered:

"It's simple, really. Well… it's a paradox, but a rather simple one. Since the void was eternal, limitless, and forever changing, it was inevitable that sooner or later, it would produce something that contradicted its fundamental qualities. In other words, something unchanging. That was desire. A single constant in the forever shifting abyss."

She coughed, and then added with embarrassment:

"Oh… at least that was how it was explained to me. But if you think about it, it makes sense. A desire can't change, because if it does, it ceases to be itself and becomes a different desire. So, the concept of desire is static by nature."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Huh? What? That's... a bit too complicated for me. What a weird myth! I like the ones you tell way better — you know, the stories about cunning men defeating giants, building wooden as… horses to conquer cities, and fighting sea monsters."

A subtle smile appeared on Neph's face.

Sunny enjoyed the view of it, then scratched the back of his head and added:

"But I get the idea. Desire was the first unchanging thing born from the everchanging void, so it was in contradiction to the void."

She nodded.

"Yes. A desire also can't exist by itself. It needs a subject. You want something, strive for something, dream of something… so, a desire has to be directed somewhere. Hence, with it came direction."

Sunny looked at her with a strange expression.

"That… strangely makes sense."

So the direction the myth spoke about was a natural consequence of desire… or rather the concept of desire being born within the void. And since both were constant, their existence was in opposition to the forever changing abyss.

Where there had been only chaos, there was now something resembling order.

…Coincidentally, the word "directionless" could also mean "disorderly" in the runic language. And therefore, the word "direction" could also mean "order".

Even though it was not entirely correct, such an analogy made it easier for Sunny to understand the underlying meaning of the strange creation myth. It was a conflict between chaos and order… the void creatures represented chaos, while the gods represented order.

He hesitated for a moment, then asked:

"But a desire for what? What was that desire?"

Cassie laughed quietly.

"Nobody knows. In fact, I don't think that anyone can know… we humans are not capable of truly understanding divine matters, after all, so this myth is merely a crude facsimile of the real story. Personally, I think it was the very idea of desire, not a specific one.

That's why there is a fairy tale about the Well of Wishes here in the Tomb of Ariel — a magical place that can grant any wish, not just the correct one."

Sunny looked at her, amused.

"...You know that fairy tale too?"

Cassie coughed and turned away in embarrassment.

"Oh. Yeah… it's popular among the younger inhabitants of Fallen Grace. I listened to it once or twice out of curiosity."

She lingered for a moment, then walked to the next mural. On it, six radiant figures were shown standing around the mass of golden flames, which had become much smaller. Vague, but terrifying shapes could be seen in the surrounding darkness, swarming them. The blind girl pointed at the image.

"The gods were born from desire. Then, they waged a terrible war on the old ones, the creatures of the void."

Chapter-1386: Forests, Plains, Rivers, and a Vast Blue Sky

The next few murals depicted the battles between the six radiant figures and the vague shapes hiding in the darkness of the abyssal void. Sunny found them quite funny… he already knew that the war between the gods and the unknown were waged with weapons like death, time, and space. It had truly been a war beyond human comprehension.

However, the ancient people had drawn the murals according to their human imagination. In them, the gods battled the void creatures with swords, spears… and even fists, from time to time. Imagining a god having a fistfight with a primordial horror was rather comical.

Sunny shook his head.

"It's curious, isn't it? The gods are always said to be the enemies of the void creatures… but really, they are void creatures themselves. Just of a different breed."

Both the unknown and the gods had been born from the void. So, the gods were unknown themselves — primordial beings from before anything remotely human had ever existed. It was just that they were a very special kind of these ancient abominations. A kind that was inherently opposed to the abyss that had spawned them, and everything it represented.

Nephis slowly nodded.

"Indeed. But does it matter?"

Sunny lightly shook his head.

"I guess it doesn't."

Awakened and Nightmare Creatures were also two sides of the same coin. That didn't make them the same.

The three of them continued forward, studying the murals. Eventually, the void creatures seemed to have been defeated, albeit not destroyed. Beaten and diminished, they crouched in a dark corner of the abyss, surrounded by the six radiant figures.

'This is interesting.'

Sunny knew very little about how the war between the gods and the unknown had ended. The description of the drop of ichor only said that the void had been bound… but not how it had happened.

Finally, the three of them stopped in front of the second to last mural. On it, the six radiant figures seemed to be holding a net made from what was left of the golden flame, surrounded by a whirlwind of sparks. They threw the net on the crouching creatures of the void, engulfing them in radiance.

The last mural depicted a familiar landscape — the black abyss was gone, replaced by forests, plains, rivers, and a vast blue sky.

He looked at Cassie expectedly. She had been the one to spend a whole year with the inhabitants of the Nightmare, after all. If anyone knew their myths, it would be her.

The blind girl sighed.

"In the end, when the old ones were defeated, the gods took direction and used their weapons to wrap it around the void. That was how the void was sealed. And... that was also how the world was created."

Sunny stared at the last mural, overcome by an eerie feeling.

'Wait a second…'

The forests, plains, rivers, and a vast blue sky… the crouching beings enveloped by a net of golden radiance…

He already knew that these murals had been drawn according to the limited imagination of their creators. So, if he looked beyond what

was drawn, at the underlying meaning…

Desire, direction… order… the absolute laws like time and space that the gods had created to use as weapons.

Did it mean that the gods had created the world… the universe, rather… by sealing the void in the cage of universal laws?

And if this was how the world had been born…

He shivered.

"So… wait… does it mean that everything we know is basically a cage for the abyssal beings of the void? That… that everything is just the outer shell of a prison built to contain the abyss?"

Cassie and Nephis turned to him somberly.

After a while, the blind girl said, her voice strangely calm:

"I think… not quite that literally, but yes. The void was never destroyed, it was only bound. And the world is what binds it… not the waking world, and not the Dream Realm. More of… existence itself, as we know it."

Sunny remained silent for a while, not knowing what to say. What Cassie said sounded terrifying. It was as though he was standing on the surface of a deep, dark ocean, separated from its lightless depths only by a thin, fragile film of ice.

That ice was all of existence.

'Damnation...'

Why was he so bothered by some stupid myth, anyway?

The answer was obvious. It would have been easy to dismiss the whole thing as an ancient superstition if not for one detail. The Spell had put the same story in the description of the drop of Shadow God's blood, which meant that there was at least some truth to this myth, no matter how distorted.

'Curses.'

Eventually, he let out a shaky breath and said in an unconvincingly carefree tone:

"Well… that's a bit disturbing, isn't it?"

Indeed, it was.

Much more than that, however…

It raised so many questions.

Was his interpretation of the myth close to truth? How had Weaver entered the void if it was sealed by existence itself? What had the Demon of Fate witnessed there, exactly?

Come to think of it, the creation myth explained a lot of things, but one thing it failed to explain were the daemons. Where had they come from? Who was the Unknown, whose children they supposedly were? How were the daemons and their progenitor connected to the gods and to the void?

There were much more fundamental questions, as well.

For example, the path of Ascension led to divinity, while the path of Corruption was opposed to it, leading to unholiness. And since what opposed the gods was the void… was the true meaning of "profane" and "unholy", as used by the Spell, actually "having to do with the void"?

Was the abyss sealed within the world the source of Corruption? Was the vile darkness permeating the souls of Nightmare Creature a manifestation of the everlasting void?

And how did the Nightmares, the Spell, and Weaver's mysterious schemes fit into all of this?

Sunny suddenly shuddered as a certain thought entered his mind.

Now that the gods were dead…

Was the spreading Corruption a sign that the seals containing the void were weakening?

Was the cage the gods had created slowly falling apart?

The disturbing chill he had felt after learning the truth of the last mural was washed away by curiosity… but now, the feeling of dread was back.

He hesitated for a few moments, then cleared his throat and looked away from the ancient, damaged, fading image of forests, rivers, and plains.

...The net of black cracks covering the painted vastness of a blue sky did not look ominous at all.

"Let's go find that damned library and get the hell away from here as fast as possible, shall we? This place… it seriously gives me creeps…"

For once in his life, Sunny hoped to never find answers to the questions gnawing at his mind.

Chapter-1387: Divine, Unholy

As they moved deeper and deeper into the flooded temple, Sunny couldn't help but think about the eerie story told by the ancient murals. It seemed as though he had learned something important…

But, of course, there were a dozen questions for every answer he had received. Like always.

'Divine, unholy…'

Knowing that the very fabric of the world was like a cage for the abyssal void that dwelled beneath made him feel uneasy — understandably so. However, Sunny did not dwell on that fact for too long.

There was no point, anyway. Matters like these were too distant and inconceivable for a mere mortal to think about. Even if the seals created by the gods were slowly crumbling, what was a human like him supposed to do? Even if Sunny was a Sovereign, he would have been like an ant compared to the powers involved in this process.

The seals had existed for eons, anyway. Despite their supposed weakened state, they would keep existing for just as long. By the time the void broke free of its prison and destroyed everything, he would be long dead, with not even dust left of his bones.

…Probably.

In any case, he was more interested in something else. The true source of the Corruption… Sunny had a vague suspicion that it was the void before, but now, he was almost certain.

'How does it work, though?'

The timeline of the Dream Realm civilizations was not very clear, but

one thing he did know was that the Corrupted — the Nightmare Creatures — had always existed, even when the seals of the void were new and pristine.

The first era Sunny knew of was the era of the void… he decided to call it the Age of Chaos. During the Age of Chaos, the gods had been born, waged war against the elder abyssal beings, and eventually defeated them, thus creating the world.

What followed was the Age of Heroes. Noctis and the other Chain Lords had been born during that period. Back then, at the dawn of time, humans were not a dominant force in the world yet. Their nascent civilization was growing and spreading, but the continuation of its existence was not at all guaranteed.

Instead, those ancient humans had to fight against the Corrupted to conquer new lands, protect their cities, and avoid extinction. They needed powerful champions to battle the dreadful beings who populated the young world, and therefore that time was remembered as the Age of Heroes.

More importantly… the Nightmare Creatures already existed back then, when the gods were alive and the seals of the void were undamaged. How?

'Huh…'

Sunny frowned.

'I guess the gods did not imprison all of the void and every void being when creating the prison.'

It was easy to imagine that some remnants of the abyss slipped through their fingers and came to exist in the newly created world. Noctis had told him once that the gods and the daemons fought side by side as allies in the battles of the ancient past… therefore, it was easy to conclude that the war against the abyss did not end as soon as the abyss itself was sealed.

There had to have been dire battles at the dawn of the new world, resulting in these abyssal remnants being exterminated. Come to

think of it, Nephis had told him that a terrible creature was slain by the gods once, at the dawn of time, and that its blood seeped into the ground, becoming true darkness.

The place where the creature fell was now known as the Hollow Mountains, beneath which lay the darkness of the Underworld. That creature had to have been a void being. That proved that at least some of them had walked the world of the gods after its creation.

'What are void beings, though?'

Sunny felt as though he was on the precipice of an important discovery.

The gods… he had thought once that they were simply divine titans. Now, however, Sunny was inclined to believe that the gods were beyond Ranks and Classes altogether. Similarly, void creatures would not have been unholy titans — just like the gods, they had to have been creatures of an entirely different order.

More importantly, they were simply different. These abyssal horrors were beings from before time, space, death, and every other law that comprised the fabric of reality. These existences were completely alien to the reality familiar to Sunny... opposed to it, even.

And if Sunny knew one thing about creatures of great power, it was that they exerted influence on the world.

Saints and powerful Masters had a mystical presence to them. Nightmare Creatures of higher Classes spread their influence across vast territories. Sovereigns ruled over grand Domains.

Void beings were without a doubt immensely powerful, so what kind of influence would they exert on a world that was inherently alien to their nature? Would the fabric of reality and the very laws comprising it start to rot and come undone around them?

Sunny felt his heart skipping a beat.

Was that... was that the true nature of the Corruption?

Was it a rot caused by the influence of the primordial void, simply

because of its alien nature?

…That would explain why the creatures infected by that rot possessed an insatiable desire to destroy those who were not. Why they all seemed mad, revolting, and alien… appallingly wrong in some strange and sinister way. The divine and the unholy were inherently opposed to each other, after all. It was in their very nature to strive to obliterate each other.

'I… I feel like I'm not far from the truth.'

Sunny remained silent for a while, walking behind Cassie with a distant expression on his face. The world he lived in — the world of the Spell, the constant battle against the abominations, and the ruined realm of dreams and nightmares — suddenly made much more sense.

It was not understanding, exactly. The conclusions Sunny made were too vast and had too many consequences to be understood in just a few minutes. But the feeling of it all was somehow more clear now.

He lingered for a bit, then threw a furtive glance at Nephis.

'What about Neph, then?'

Her Ascended Ability, [Longing], made her immune to the Corruption. Knowing what he knew now, that seemingly weak Ability seemed even more impossible.

More than that, one of her Attributes was called "Nephilim". Its description read:

'There once were terrible creatures born of an unholy union between the divine and the profane. Nephilim were the most beautiful, and the most harrowing of them all.'

If the divine and the unholy were inherently opposed to each other, then how could there have been creatures born from their union? How terrible had they been, really, and what had happened to them?

Shaking his head slightly, Sunny sighed and looked away from Neph's slender figure.

'I take it back. Nothing makes sense. I'm just confused even more!'

Taking a step forward, he suppressed a groan and covered his face with a palm.

Chapter-1388: Wheels of History

Sunny continued to think about the history of the Dream Realm.

Age of Chaos was the first, ending with the imprisonment of the void and the creation of the world. It was followed by an age that could be called the Age of Gods — a prehistoric time when the gods and those living things they created, as well as the daemons who came out of nowhere, battled the remnant abyssal creatures across the newborn world.

Then came the Age of Heroes. It started when the nascent humanity started to spread and fight against the Corrupted creatures inhabiting the world for dominion over it. It ended when the abominations were pushed back and largely exterminated, turning from an everpresent danger into dire, but rare foes.

What followed was a different age… an age when humanity ruled the world unopposed. Noctis had not known its name — perhaps because people living in that time needed none. For them, it was simply now. A golden age of peace and prosperity...

'Relatively speaking, of course. I am sure there was plenty of bloodshed and conflict even after most of the Corrupted had already been slain or driven into the wilderness. Humans are humans, after all… there were other tribes of creatures inhabiting the world, as well. I doubt that everyone lived together in absolute harmony.'

Due to their immortality, Noctis and the other Chain Lords — powerful Transcendents born in the Age of Heroes — lived long enough to witness the new age, as well.

In fact, they might have had more to do with the change of epochs than anyone knew. Noctis considered the destruction of the Kingdom of Hope to be the turning point in history, one that signified the end of the Age of Heroes.

Which meant that the Golden Age was poisoned from the very start. It began with the imprisonment of Hope, and ended when she broke free from her chains. During that time, the gods grew distant and indifferent. Their followers even started to fight among themselves. Slowly, prosperity waned, turning into stagnation and decay.

Both the First and Second of Sunny's Nightmares took place at the dusk of the Golden Age, not long before the daemons rose in rebellion against the gods.

That war, the last war, destroyed the civilization of the Dream Realm. Although it was like a flash in the scope of history, perhaps its brief terror was worthy of being considered to be an age of its own.

The Age of Daemons… a terrible age of dread and destruction.

Although that age was the latest, it was also the most mysterious. Everything the humans of the waking world had found in the Dream Realm were marks left by the great war between the daemons and the gods, and yet, almost nothing was known about it.

Why did it start? How did it end? How did the gods die? What happened to their enemies, the daemons?

All that Sunny knew was that at some point between the start of the Doom War and the present day, the Seeds of Nightmares appeared, and the Corruption reclaimed the world it had been almost banished from once. It was the end of the Dream Realm.

'Come to think of it… I'm wrong.'

The history of the Dream Realm had never really ended. There were human settlements on its perilous reaches today, after all… great Citadels like Bastion and Ravenheart, and many smaller ones. Where hundreds of thousands of Awakened lived, fought, and survived, slowly claiming more and more land from the Nightmare Creatures.

'Almost… like a new Age of Heroes…'

Or rather, the Age of the Nightmare Spell.

Sunny dodged a drop of water that fell from the ceiling of the narrow

corridor and tilted his head a little.

'Huh.'

Viewed from this perspective, it almost seemed as if the purpose of the Nightmare Spell was to repopulate the Dream Realm, which had been turned to lifeless hell by the Doom War, and breathe new life into it. To push the wheels of history that had stopped spinning a long time ago and make them revolve again, carrying the once desolate world into the future.

'It's almost like Weaver is some kind of a noble hero…'

Of course, that change had come at the expense of countless deaths and immeasurable misery among the inhabitants of the waking world. And Sunny did not really buy that the Demon of Fate had been any kind of hero, let alone a noble one…

Still. The implication seemed too sensible to be discarded completely.

The Age of Chaos, the Age of Gods, the Age of Heroes, the Golden Age, the Age of Daemons… and the Age of the Nightmare Spell.

If seen in such a framework, the history…

Could make Sunny a huge amount of contribution points. Just imagining it made his eyes gleam.

'If I manage to write up this theory well and publish it, accurate or not… my, oh my! I'll be swimming in academic achievements. Let alone a guest lecturer, I'll be made an honorary professor! A dean, even!'

As he grinned greedily, Cassie slowed her steps a little and raised her hand.

"We're close. Be cautious… if there are really records left, we should be careful not to damage them any further."

Although the corridors they had walked through were largely flooded, this section of the lost temple seemed strangely dry. Perhaps the structure here was much more durable, and had thus resisted the

passage of time better… perhaps there were still some enchantments protecting the inner sanctum. In any case, the floor they walked on gradually became drier.

Soon, the three Masters passed a chamber filled to the brim with shelves. There had been countless books on them once, but now the shelves lay broken, the ancient scrolls long destroyed by water. Sunny checked a few, only to shake his head in disappointment. Even those that seemed relatively better preserved were utterly illegible.

They moved further, passing several similar chambers. The library of the temple had indeed been vast once… but now, all the knowledge accumulated by the sybils and their faithful priests was lost. Some of it was destroyed by moisture, some seemed to have been burned, while some had been obliterated by the Defiled sybil in her rage.

'Such a shame…'

Finally, they reached a tall door. Just like all the other doors in the inner sanctum, it had long been turned to rotten splinters… however, the chamber behind it — the largest one they've seen in the last few minutes — looked strangely untouched.

Much more importantly, there were no broken shelves and rotten scrolls within it.

Instead, there were stone slates.

Chapter-1389: Shifting Map

After entering the central chamber of the ancient library, Sunny felt his excitement diminish somewhat. The stone slates had seemed unharmed from the outside, but at a closer look, they were not in the best state.

The Defiled sybil had rampaged in this chamber, as well. Many slates were shattered, some turned to rubble, others to dust. The whole place was a mess, with deep cracks littering its walls and the ceiling. There were deep puddles on the floor, and the cold darkness shrouding the chamber echoed with the sound of falling water.

Still… there were many slates that were unharmed, as well.

Cassie remained motionless for a few moments, then sighed and sat down on a relatively dry pile of rubble.

Sunny gave her a stare.

"...What, you're not going to help us look?"

The blind girl smiled.

"I am looking."

He coughed and awkwardly turned away.

'Yeah, way to go, genius. Asking a blind person if she'll look…'

Although Cassie's Awakened Ability allowed her to navigate the world, it did not grant her sight — Cassie sensed the future as if she lived it, meaning that she remained blind.

It was her Ascended Ability that allowed her to see, even if it was only through someone else's eyes. Someone like Sunny or Nephis, for example — which meant that she could only look at the slates that

they were looking at.

So, she could only help them identify the correct one, not find it herself.

Hiding his embarrassment, Sunny cleared his throat.

"So, what exactly should we search for?"

Cassie lingered for a moment.

"We should probably separate all the intact slates first. Even those that do not contain the information we're currently looking for might be useful later."

Indeed… rescuing Effie and Jet was not going to be their last stop on the Great River. They would have to travel to Twilight as well, and then journey all the way to the dawn of time to attack Verge.

There was no telling what kind of dangers hid beneath the surface of the endless river. Even though the information recorded by the sybils was outdated by now, it was still immensely valuable.

Cassie tilted her head a little.

"Other than that… keep an eye out for any mention of flowers."

Sunny nodded. There was not much known about the place where Effie and Jet were trapped, but the inhabitants of Fallen Grace referred to it as the Wind Flower. The vague stories they had heard about that area of the Great River told very little, except for how no one ever returned from there.

It wasn't even known where the name Wind Flower had come from.

With a sigh, Sunny nodded and went about sifting through the rubble without wasting much time. Soon, he and Nephis were crawling through the debris, separating those slates that were only lightly damaged from those that were completely destroyed.

As they did, Sunny briefly looked at each one.

Although Ananke had taught them how to navigate the Great River — at least enough for them to make their way to Fallen Grace — he couldn't really read the maps engraved into the slates. The maps Sunny was used to were based on topography and landmarks like mountains, rivers, and craters.

What was there to put on a map of an endless, vast river? The system the sybils had used was rather elaborate. It was based on a convoluted method of assigning each slate a kind of coordinates that had to do with its relation to the edges of the Great River, the passage of the suns, and the approximate distance to the few stationary hazards plaguing the Tomb of Ariel.

None of the slates depicted the full map of the Great River, either. Instead, they were supposed to be put together and moved around as the areas described on them shifted their locations, with old coordinates being stricken from the slate and new ones added.

Since most of the slates had been destroyed, there was no hope of recreating the full map.

However… one great thing that the sybils and their servants had done was including a description of what was depicted on the slates, engraved on the back. So, instead of trying to decipher the markings describing the coordinates, Sunny read these descriptions instead.

His face slowly grew gloomy.

"A giant maw that opens underwater and swallows entire island-ships… a region where the wind literally cuts flesh… what the hell, an illusory island that can only be seen by the dying…"

So what, if he suddenly saw that island, it would mean that he was going to die in the next few minutes? Or was it the other way around, and it was seeing the island that killed people?

In any way, it was very much way too creepy.

Sunny knew that the Tomb of Ariel was a dreadful place, but now, he suddenly felt lucky to have made it to Fallen Grace in one piece.

Well… they had encountered the time storm, which was pretty

terrifying even as far as the local perils were concerned. So, calling himself lucky might have not been quite correct.

'Whatever…'

After a while, the two of them settled into a rhythm. Sunny was looking for those slates that were in one piece, while Nephis collected those that had been broken into pieces, but could be restored, and put them back together with the help of the Dark Shaper.

Cassie, meanwhile, rested on the pile of rubble for a while, then got bored and stood up to take a walk around the chamber.

She hovered near them for a bit, then put her hand on the wall and slowly traced the perimeter of the chamber with her fingers. Since there was rubble everywhere, it took her a long time to complete the circle and get back to the entrance.

…Actually, hadn't she been gone for too long?

Suddenly worried, Sunny pulled his attention away from the slates and concentrated on his shadow sense. It only took him a split second.

To his relief, he could still clearly feel Cassie's shadow. Turning around, he looked at the far end of the chamber and saw her delicate figure there, standing in front of the cracked wall. She seemed deep in thought.

Frowning slightly, Sunny called out to her:

"Hey! Is that wall very interesting? Come here and keep us company!"

Perhaps it was foolish, considering that Cassie could sense the future… but Sunny was not absolutely sure that the flooded temple was safe now, and having the blind girl outside his immediate reach made him feel uncomfortable.

What would happen if they were suddenly attacked?

Hearing his voice, Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then turned to face them and pointed to the wall.

"Actually… it is interesting."

She paused for a moment, and then added with uncertainty:

"A slight wind is coming from the cracks. I think there is another room behind that wall."

Chapter-1390: Guiding Light

Standing up, Sunny stretched and walked over to where Cassie was standing. Extending his shadow sense through the cracked wall, he remained silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"Good catch. There is indeed a hidden space there."

To think that he had almost missed it...

The blind girl stared at him for a bit, which gave Sunny a hint to look around.

'Damn… it's still creepy, to know that she's riding my senses. Can't she ask, at least? That Ability of hers is not limited to sight, so… ah, I don't even want to think what kinds of things she can sense me sensing…'

Suddenly feeling hot, Sunny glanced at Cassie and asked in a stifled tone:

"What are you looking for?"

The blind girl lingered.

"If there's a secret space, there has to be a mechanism to unlock it. Some kind of lever, perhaps. Oh… and give me some credit, alright? I am polite enough to know when not to use my Ability."

He suppressed an impulse to jump back.

"What, you can read thoughts now, too?!"

Cassie took a deep breath, then patiently shook her head.

"No. It was just written all over your face."

Sunny let out a sigh of relief, then trembled.

'Wait… she's looking through my eyes, so how can she see my face?'

At that moment, Neph's patted him on the shoulder.

"Because she looked through mine. Honestly, Sunny… for someone who claims to have never used his shadow to do perverted things at the Academy dormitory, you sure think of weird stuff often."

He stared at her in disbelief.

"What do you mean, "claims to"? I absolutely did not! You know I can't lie!"

Nephis looked at Cassie with a hint of a smile on her lips.

"Notice that he said "did not"... instead of "have not". Hmm."

Sunny remained silent, his mouth open.

'Oh… I see what's going on.'

Scoffing, he turned away.

"Yeah, and until I say "will not", you better behave. Who knows what weird stuff I'll think of?"

There were a few moments of silence, and then Nephis said a bit awkwardly from behind him:

"...So, whatever mechanism there was to unlock the door, it has to have broken a long time ago."

He grinned and watched as she stepped forward and delivered a swift punch to the cracked wall. The ancient stone shattered and collapsed, revealing a dark space beyond.

Sunny shielded his face from the cloud of stone dust and peered inside.

Hidden behind a false wall was a small circular chamber. There was an altar in its center, with something laying on it. As Nephis raised

her torch, its light reflected from a polished metal surface.

He suddenly felt the shadows shift slightly, and widened his eyes in disbelief.

'That glow…'

There was a staff of pristine white wood laying on the altar, untouched by dust or dirt. Both its ends were encased in a beautiful weave of bands of polished gold, with a single radiant gem… no, a crystal… crowning the top.

The rough crystal was easy to identify as a soul shard of a rather high Rank. Supreme, perhaps, or even higher. What made Sunny instinctively hold his breath, however, was something else.

The white staff was emanating an ethereal golden glow… the kind that Sunny could only see because his eyes had been altered by Weaver's lineage. The familiar and unmistakable shine that the things having to do with divinity possessed.

As he was looking at the beautiful staff, stunned, Cassie approached the altar and lowered her head. Her expression was more perplexed than shocked. She remained silent for a few moments, then said quietly:

"How… curious. I did not know that it was here."

Both Sunny and Nephis looked at her with surprise. Throwing another glance at the staff, he asked:

"You know what this thing is?"

The blind girl lingered for a bit, then nodded.

"Yes… I think I do. It fits the description of one of the holy relics that the sybils brought into the Tomb of Ariel from the outside world. Supposedly, it was a gift from one of the gods, bestowed to a priestess of their temple in the distant past."

Sunny's eyes widened.

"Wait. Are you telling me that this thing… is a Divine artifact?"

His heart was beating wildly.

Cassie smiled.

"Yes, in a sense… meaning that it is rumored to have been created by a god. However, it is not a Divine Rank artifact, if that is what you're asking. Although it does have some mystical qualities, its power is actually not that great."

She remained silent for a bit, and then added:

"Actually, that can be said about most Divine relics, and therefore about most Divine Memories created in their image… not that there's many of those around. We humans perceive Memories as something that grants us power, but for the gods and the lesser deities… they themselves were the power. So, any relic they created would have been a mere tool of convenience, not something meant to empower them."

Sunny thought about his own two Divine Memories. That description fit them perfectly. Both Weaver's Mask and the Shadow Lantern allowed him to do astonishing things… and yet, there were indeed Memories in his arsenal that empowered him much more.

There was no doubt that his Divine Memories were infinitely more powerful, and yet, they did not make him much more powerful. He had considered this paradoxical situation plenty of times, and the conclusions he made were similar to what Cassie said.

The gods did not need external sources of power, and so, the tools they left behind served specific purposes — astonishing and wondrous, but not necessarily helpful to a human.

The blind girl, meanwhile, gently caressed the white wood of the beautiful staff and added:

"In any case, this relic is called Guiding Light. It's not even a tool made to be used by a god… just something gifted to a mortal out of affection. The powers it possesses are not that stunning. It had served the sybils well before they came to the Tomb of Ariel, but after that,

this staff mostly held symbolic meaning."

Sunny stared at the beautiful golden glow for a while, then asked in a dubious tone:

"Not that stunning? So what does it do?"

Cassie thought for a bit, then hesitantly shrugged.

"It's supposed to guide people? Actually, I don't know that well."

She picked up the staff and held it carefully. After a few moments, the soft radiance of the soul shard crowning the relic swirled, growing more intense on one side.

Sunny blinked.

"What did you do?"

The blind girl suddenly seemed a little embarrassed.

"Uh, I just... sort of... thought in my head, "Miss Guiding Light, can you guide me to Wind Flower, please?""

He stared at her incredulously.

'Let's skip the first part for now...'

"So, this divine relic… is basically a pretty flashlight with a very basic navigation function?"

Cassie coughed.

"I… guess so?"

Sunny sighed, then shook his head and covered his face with a palm.

'And here I was all excited…'

Well, it could have been worse. The previous divine relic he had found in the wild was a wooden knife that could only kill one specific person, while simultaneously being responsible for turning that person into an immortal powerhouse.

Although the Guiding Light was not exactly an artifact worthy of being called divine, it was at least more useful than that.

…Actually, being able to know the general direction of almost anything you thought about was quite an amazing boon if used with foresight. Not to mention that it would help them find the members of the cohort sooner — which was why they had come to this temple, in the first place.

Sunny stared at the wooden staff for a few moments, then shook his head again.

"Well, great. Let's use this thing well. For now, though, we still have to find the information about Wind Flower."

They had already known where that place was located. What they had really come here to find was the information about what kind of dangers were waiting for them there.

Turning away, Sunny let out a disappointed sigh.

'Damn it.'

As he walked back to the slates, he tried not to look too disheartened.

'This had to be the most anticlimactic discovery of a divine relic ever...'

Chapter-1391: Rushed Exit

Sunny had wanted to get back to the slates, but as he left the secret room, he suddenly felt uneasy. Something about the chamber had changed… he couldn't quite put a finger on it, but it was as if the shadows populating it were moving.

"Hold on to something."

Hearing Cassie's voice, he put his hand on a stone pillar. In the next moment, the floor beneath him violently shook. Its already pronounced tilt was suddenly even steeper, causing countless small pieces of rubble to roll in their direction.

The sound of falling water had grown louder.

'Curses.'

Looking at his companions, Sunny sighed and said in a glum tone:

"I guess the battle did too much damage to the temple, after all."

Nephis nodded somberly.

"Should we hurry?"

He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. A swarm of sparks rose into the air, slowly forming into a familiar alloy chest.

"We probably don't have much time before this entire place sinks. Let's just load everything into the Covetous Coffer… we can continue studying the slates when we're safely back on the Chain Breaker."

Of course, safety was a relative term here in the Tomb of Ariel. Sunny had only grown more wary of the Great River after reading the records in this ancient chamber, but still… he was not enthused at the idea of having to escape the temple while it was actively

drowning.

Feeling like they had very little time left, the three Masters abandoned all attempts of categorizing the slates and simply threw everything remotely intact into the welcoming maw of the Covetous Coffer. The temple shook once more while they were at it, causing Sunny to curse in frustration.

Finally, they were done. Not wasting any time, Sunny led the way out of the central chamber, past the rooms full of rotting scrolls, and into the cold darkness of the narrow corridors leading to the great hall. By then, it felt like they were climbing a steep hill — the stone floor was tilted downward, water rushing past their feet and drenching them from above.

'Ah, I don't like this…'

Logically, Sunny understood that he would be able to escape the drowning temple even if it collapsed and started sinking. Not only was he strong enough to break through the stone walls, he also possessed Memories of the House of Night that allowed him to swim like a fish and breathe underwater.

However, he still felt tense and claustrophobic. Being caught under an immense mass of stone, with cold water rising higher and higher with each moment, was not the most pleasant of feelings. The ancient temple was shaking and groaning, slowly crumbling around them.

'I can just send one of the shadows ahead and get to the surface by using Shadow Step. I can take Nephis with me, as well.'

He glanced at Cassie, who was walking behind them while using the holy staff as a cane. After a short moment of hesitation, Sunny chose to keep all the shadows with him.

Soon, they reached the great hall where the battle had taken place. Although not much time had passed, it was in far worse shape already — there were actual waterfalls flowing through wide cracks in the distant ceiling, and the dais where Cassie and the sybil had clashed was partially submerged underwater.

His Shadows, whom he had left there to stand guard, were silently watching the rising water.

"Nightmare! Come!"

In the blink of an eye, the black stallion was already at his side. Sunny lingered for a moment, then turned around and grabbed Cassie by her thin waist.

"Excuse me…"

Effortlessly lifting the delicate girl, he placed her on the dark destrier's broad back and gave Nightmare a silent command to reach the surface as soon as possible.

"You better hold on tight!"

Cassie remained motionless for a split second, then suddenly paled and grabbed onto the dreadful steed's mane tightly. She opened her mouth to say something, but a moment later, both of them were gone in a burst of wind. All that could be heard was the sound of adamantine hooves ringing on stone in the distance, and a short shriek.

'Now, then…'

No matter how fast Sunny and his shadows were, Nightmare was many times faster. And since one of those shadows had been accompanying the black stallion, the three of them — the Shadow, the shadow, and the blind seer — reached the surface much sooner than Sunny would have.

By the time he and Nephis reached the edge of the dais, he could already see the crimson blaze of the twilight sky. Just at that moment, the temple shuddered in another violent quake…

Grasping Neph's hand, Sunny pulled her into the dark embrace of shadows. A short instance later, they stepped on the ashen soil of the incinerated garden, bright sunlight briefly blinding both.

When Sunny regained his vision, the first thing he saw was Cassie kneeling on the ground in front of Nightmare, her face of an

unhealthy greenish color. Taking a few deep breaths, the blind girl raised a trembling hand and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"W—w… warn me next time! D—damn it!"

He grinned.

"What's the point? Didn't you already know what I was going to do?"

Sunny hurriedly helped her stand up, dodging the tip of the Guiding Light in the process.

"Watch where you point this thing… in any case, there's no time to tarry! We might have escaped the temple, but this whole island is going to fall apart soon. So, hurry up and run!"

At that point, Nephis gave him a somber look and said, her voice flat:

"I'll hurry and run… as soon as you let go of my hand."

She lingered for a moment, and then added evenly:

"...Or do you want me to carry you?"

Sunny froze, then lowered his gaze and realized that he was, indeed, still holding Neph's hand. He blinked a couple of times, then looked up and gave her a smile.

"Actually, yeah. I wouldn't mind being carried."

With that, Sunny let go and dashed toward the shore of the island-ship.

Soon, the graceful silhouette of the Chain Breaker appeared in front of them. He felt much too happy to see the ancient ship, and leaped onto its deck without wasting a single second.

Just as he did, the drowning island resounded with a deafening crack, and split apart.

Chapter-1392: Desolation

After the island broke apart, it did not take a lot of time for the debris to disappear into the depths of the Great River. Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie stood on the deck of the Chain Breaker, observing the death throes of this lost part of Fallen Grace in somber silence.

The flowing water seethed and boiled, turning into white foam. The ashen remains of the dark garden were pulled down by the current and swallowed by the depths. In something that felt like too short of a time, though, the surface of the river became calm and clear once again, with not a sign of the massive island-vessel left in sight.

Sunny sighed softly.

The destruction of the artificial island had been too depressing of a scene. It was like a metaphor of the futility of human existence… countless River People had worked hard to create and maintain it, and even more spent their lives walking upon its ground. But now, it was gone, swallowed by the elements in mere minutes. With every trace of it erased from existence.

Weave was going to be erased the same way before too long. The cities of the sybils had already disappeared… only Fallen Grace remained, its fate all but decided. The Tomb of Ariel had been home to a thriving civilization once…

But now, it was nothing but a Nightmare.

Sunny shook his head, suddenly grim. Would the cities of the waking world be gone one day, too? He had not even known that there was a world outside the endless sprawl of NQSC once. It was hard to imagine that a place so populous and boundless could cease to exist.

…But then again, the waking world was already a world of ruins. Plenty of thriving cities had been erased from its maps — most of

them, even. Entire continents stood desolate, devoid of life, and uninhabited. He even witnessed the extinction of one of these empty continents himself.

'My mood is all over the place today.'

What was there to feel sad about? That island had been nothing by the lair of a dangerous abomination. They had come to its shore, killed the abomination, and absconded with precious loot. Cassie even received a pretty stick as a bonus.

If anything, he should be feeling utterly delighted.

However, Sunny felt mostly tired and sore all over. The battle against the Drowned was a short one, but nevertheless very intense. He was battered and bruised, albeit not injured too badly.

"Gone! Gone!"

Sunny turned and glanced at Crow Crow, who was hopping excitedly on the railing and staring at the empty space where the island had been with a curious expression. The small bird was unburdened by any kind of heavy thoughts. In fact, it did not have any thoughts at all…

After all, it was an Echo.

Now that the island was destroyed, though, that Echo had a job to do.

As he watched, Cassie approached the black bird and gently took it into her hands. Saying something, the blind girl opened her palms and let the crow fly away.

The last thing they heard before Jet's Echo disappeared into the distance were indignant caws:

"Stuck! Stuck!"

Crow Crow had a simple mission — to inform the inhabitants of Fallen Grace about the death of the Defiled sybil, and then find its way back to the ship. The three Masters did not know how long it

would take them to rescue Effie and Jet, so they wanted to make sure that the last city would migrate downstream in their absence.

Hopefully, by the time they returned, the frail Riverborn would be doing much better.

'That's done, then.'

Sunny glanced at the wooden staff in Cassie's hands, then at the sails of the Chain Breaker. He hesitated for a moment, then asked tiredly:

"Should we set sail?"

After a moment of silence, Nephis shook her head.

"The night is approaching, and all of us are tired. I'd rather just drift with the current until tomorrow. A little rest won't do us any harm."

Sunny was happy to hear it.

…Soon, they were gathered on the mess deck at the stern of the ship. All its compartments had been cleared of debris and repaired by the inhabitants of Fallen Grace, but the three Masters did not visit most of them often, since there was no need to. They mostly spent their time on the upper deck, in their living quarters, or on the mess deck near the galley.

There was freshly prepared food on the table, giving off the familiar, delicious smell of Neph's cooking. The Covetous Coffer stood with its lid open, its teeth gleaming in the warm light of a lantern. Sunny was cradling a cup of tea in his hands, glancing at the several slates laid down in front of him.

Honestly, though, he was in no mood to study their mysteries. He just wanted to fill his belly and rest.

With a sigh, he pushed the slates away and pulled his plate closer. Swallowing the first mouthful of a fragrant meat porridge, Sunny closed his eyes in delight.

Nephis was preoccupied with eating, as well. Cassie, though, seemed to have forgotten about it — she was playing with her new shiny toy

instead. The soul shard at the tip of the holy staff was emanating light, its intensity changing from time to time.

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then asked:

"What are you doing?"

The blind girl took a sip of tea absentmindedly.

"Trying to figure out how it works. It's weird… the enchantment doesn't seem to respond to everything. It points to you, Nephis, Effie, and Kai… but not Jet or that person, Mordret. Or Fallen Grace, for that matter. It does respond to Wind Flower, though."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, then shifted his perception and gazed beneath the surface of the Guiding Light. Just as he had expected, there was no weave there. There were no runes, either… just a field of blinding radiance.

He had seen something similar when looking at the knives created by Sun God. Within each, there was nothing but a radiant ocean of something — soul essence, perhaps — and a sole string of fate, bound onto itself and looping endlessly.

Such was the sorcery of gods, entirely unreasonable and void of any kind of logic he could understand.

'Looping endlessly…'

His tired mind got caught on these words, but he was distracted just then by Neph's strangely muffled voice:

"Found it."

Shaking awake from his reverie, Sunny turned and looked at her.

Nephis had a spoon in her mouth, holding one of the slates he had pushed away in both hands. Sunny was rather amused by that sight.

"...What did you find?"

She blinked a couple of times, then awkwardly removed the spoon

from her mouth and pointed it at the slate.

"Wind Flower. Uh... it's described right here."

Chapter-1393: Vortex

Soon, all three of them were sitting side by side, with the slate resting on the table in front of them. Cassie was tracing her fingers across the stone surface, a focused look on her face.

After a while, she slowly nodded.

"The coordinates match. It is indeed the right place."

The blind girl was much more proficient in navigating the Great River, considering how much longer she had spent here than Sunny and Nephis. She was also the one who had learned the transcript system of the sybils and pinned down where Effie and Jet were trapped, in the first place.

"Wind Flower, huh…"

Sunny looked at the slate. There were neat columns of symbols engraved on it, as well as an image of a messy circle with frayed edges. It resembled a vortex more than anything, or maybe a cyclone. After studying it for a few moments, he reached out and turned the slate over.

Familiar runes covered its reverse side. Without wasting any time, the three Masters read them.

Pretty soon, Sunny's expression darkened.

'...The currents of the River are twisted and treacherous near Wind Flower. Strong gales violently assaulted our ship, as if trying to push it back. Desperate to escape our pursuers, we persisted, entering deeper into the mist. The surrounding waters moved in the wrong direction and with unnatural speed. It was as if we had lost our way and found ourselves near the Edge.

At some point, we were not struggling against the repelling winds anymore. Instead, overcome by fear, we were battling the raging tide that pulled us deeper and deeper, toward the source of the wind…'

The first part of the text engraved into the reverse side of the slate was an excerpt from a report made by one of the Outsiders who had lived in Fallen Grace.

He ventured on a long journey with a small fleet, hoping to find out the fate of a different city, one of the last with which Fallen Grace still maintained a connection… until the visitors and merchant ship from that city had stopped coming, as well.

The fleet managed to learn that the city had been destroyed, but on their way back, they were attacked by powerful Defiled abominations. After a furious battle, only three ships managed to escape. Pursued by the enemies, they were forced to enter the dangerous waters around Wind Flower.

'...For a few moments, the mist cleared, allowing me to glimpse the true nature of the tide. We were hopelessly caught inside a whirlpool of titanic proportions, which spun around a bottomless and dark abyss. There was an island hovering above the darkness, with a tall and magnificent tower rising above the misty cliffs.

Terror grasped our hearts when we realized that the tide was pulling us into the darkness. Desperate to save our lives, we tried to escape…'

In the end, only one of the three ships managed to fight its way out. The other two were swallowed by the vortex, never to be seen again.

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"So… it's a giant whirlpool."

Something like that would explain how Effie and Jet had ended up stranded. If the vessel they were traveling on had been pulled into the monstrous vortex and destroyed, they would have no way of getting out again… or rather, no way of getting out again without some great luck.

It seemed that they had reached the flying island at the center instead of being crushed in the depths, at least. The fact that Crow Crow was around to deliver messages proved that.

Cassie silently shook her head.

"Not just a giant whirlpool. Don't forget that the Great River is a river of time… any anomaly of its current is not a mundane one. There has to be something strange going on at Wind Flower, as well."

Nephis nodded.

"But what?"

Since none of them knew the answer, they turned back to the slate. The rest of the runes on its reverse side contained notes made by the priests and priestesses who had served the sybils.

The information they had recorded was not too helpful, though, due to the fact that almost no one returned from Wind Flower alive. That, however, was valuable knowledge in and of itself.

The place called Wind Flower had not always been known by that name. Its previous one, however, was long lost. The magnificent tower the Outsider from the Fallen Grace mentioned had been a stronghold of a powerful Seeker once — there had been plenty of them throughout the Tomb of Ariel before the foundation of Verge.

It was unknown whether the Seeker had left the citadel to challenge the Estuary, still resided there, or perished a long time ago. All that the sybils of Fallen Grace knew was that, at some point, no one could approach the citadel anymore.

There was only one exception that they had heard of…

A familiar name.

'The Serpent King…'

It was rumored that the Serpent King — Daeron of the Twilight Sea — had reached the stronghold and spent some time there, then returned to lead his people in the war against the Defilement.

Sunny stared at the runes with a thoughtful expression.

They had not learned all the secrets of Wind Flower from the slate, exactly. But they had learned two crucial pieces of information.

First, that it was possible to brave its danger and come back in one piece — the Serpent King had proved it.

Second…

He looked at Nephis, then at Cassie, and said:

"At least we know the general nature of that place. Fighting against the whirlpool will be hard, but doable. The problem, though, is that the island is floating above its chasm. So, if we don't want to be pulled into the depths and killed… the Chain Breaker has to be able to fly by the time we reach Wind Flower. Cassie, can you repair it in time?"

The blind girl frowned and remained silent for a few long moments. Eventually, she slowly shook her head.

"No… there is not enough time, nor is there enough resources to fully restore the enchantments of the ship by then."

As Sunny's expression grew somber, she hesitated a bit, and added:

"However… I think there is something I can do."

Cassie stood up and paced for about a minute, thinking about something furiously.

"Yes… yes, that can work, too… I'll need to…"

Finally, she stopped and spoke again:

"I can't restore the connection between the sacred tree and the enchantment circle in time, but I can repair the circle itself, I think."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"What would it mean?"

The blinded girl pointed to the deck.

"It means that the sorcery that allows the ship to fly will be fully functional. It's just that it would not have a source of power. But… we can use our own essence to fuel the enchantment, limited as it is. The Chain Breaker won't stay in the air for long, nor will it be fast, but it will carry us to that island and back."

She scratched her head awkwardly, and then added in a small voice:

"...Probably."

Sunny stared at her for a while, then let out an amused chuckle.

The odds, as always, were against them. But when had it been any different?

He shrugged.

"Good enough."

Chapter-1394: The Luxury of Being Bored

The Chain Breaker had set sail once again. This time, they had to travel back to the middle area of the Great River, where the sky was azure. They also had to travel some distance into the past — not enough to bring them anywhere near Verge, but deeper than any of the three had ever ventured.

Sunny spent the first morning lazing in bed and staring at the ceiling. He was thinking about Wind Flower. The strong winds, the twisted currents, the colossal whirlpool that pulled ships to their doom, and the island flying above the dark abyss… all of it sounded rather nasty.

There was the fact that the tower standing on the island had once belonged to a powerful Seeker, as well.

The Seekers of Truth were people who had entered the Tomb of Ariel at the same time as the sybils, or even earlier than them, but for an entirely different reason.

The Seekers had not been searching for salvation from the devastation of the doomsday war. Instead, they had braved the Nightmare Desert and found their way into the tomb built by the Demon of Dread due to their thirst for knowledge.

…Out of curiosity, basically.

They had not been a unified group of people, either, but rather disparate individuals united only by the similarity of their obsession with knowledge.

'Bunch of weirdos…'

Who would climb into a dreadful tomb simply to satiate their curiosity? Sunny would never!

Well… he had entered plenty of dangerous ruins to satiate his desire to explore the Dream Realm. But that was an entirely different matter! Firstly, he received contribution points for his exploits, from time to time. Secondly, none of those ruins had been left behind by terrifying deities.

'Come to think of it, a couple of them were…'

Like the Ebony Tower. But he had not ended up there out of curiosity. He had ended up there out of greed! That was a much better reason, so… he was not like those weird Seekers at all….

In any case, Sunny was not excited to visit the stronghold of a powerful Seeker. Not even considering the fact their desire to learn Ariel's truth had caused the birth of the Defilement, these people did not seem trustworthy at all.

A hidden island where a mysterious Seeker had lived before disappearing without a trace, surrounded by a nearly impassable barrier of water, wind, and twisted time… yes, that did not sound ominous at all.

'Damnation…'

Of course, they did not really have a choice. Effie and Jet were there, so Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie couldn't turn back.

'People fear the unknown the most.'

If the slate had told them that there was a Great Nightmare Creature living at Wind Flower, he would have been reluctantly, but calmly coming up with plans to defeat it. But it was the not knowing what waited for them at the center of the whirlpool that made Sunny feel nervous.

In the end, tired of being anxious, he decided to distract himself by doing something useful. Climbing out of his bed with a sigh, Sunny finally left his cabin and went to the upper deck.

Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare were standing guard at the bow, middle section, and the stern of the ship. Nephis was holding the steering oar, while Cassie was making preparations to repair the sorcerous circle of the ship.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then approached the blind girl.

"Hey. Can I take another look at the Guiding Light?"

Looking up, Cassie smiled at him and pointed to the sacred tree. The beautiful staff stood there, propped against its trunk.

"Thanks."

Grabbing the sacred relic of the sybils, Sunny went to his usual spot in the shade of the ketch and sat down on the deck.

'Let's start, then…'

He spent some time weaving the basic enchantments around a Transcendent soul shard. His goal was simple — to turn the Guiding Light into a Memory, so that it was easier to use and could be taken back into the waking world.

After hours of focused work, however, Sunny was left staring at the wooden staff with a deadpan expression. His eye was twitching slightly.

'Damn it!'

It was all a waste. The moment he tried to place the rudimentary weave inside the relic, the lightless strings of shadow essence dissolved in the blinding radiance hidden within the white wood. It was as if they were incinerated from simply touching divine sorcery.

'All that work, for nothing.'

Uttering a quiet curse, he stood up and put the Guiding Light back under the sacred tree.

Somewhat disheartened, Sunny went to switch with Nephis at the steering wheel. He guided the ship as she practiced with her sword,

dancing with it as the seven suns slowly traveled across the crimson sky.

He enjoyed the view a great deal.

Later, Sunny spent some time staring at the Estuary Key, not at all closer to solving its many mysteries.

He had a meal with Nephis and Cassie.

He created more essence strings to replace the ones that had been destroyed.

And practiced his own swordsmanship, mentally going over the battle with the Drowned and thinking of what he could have done better.

After all that…

Sunny had to admit to himself that he was bored.

'Huh.'

It was a rather strange and luxurious feeling. Sunny had very rarely received an opportunity to feel bored… usually, there had always been something pressing for him to do, learn, or escape.

It had been like that in the outskirts, and did not change at all after the Awakening.

But here in the Third Nightmare, brief moments of intense and unreasonable danger were separated by long stretches of calm.

Of course, he knew that the calm would not last long… it would take them some time to reach Wind Flower, but they would certainly have to fight for their lives many times on the way.

The Chain Breaker would be attacked by Nightmare Creatures — maybe today, maybe tomorrow, or the day after that. There would be dangerous anomalies waiting for them under the waves, as well — perhaps some of those described on the stone slates.

The Mad Prince could visit him in his dreams at any moment. The

appearance of the other Plagues weren't out of the question, either.

But for now, at least, there seemed to be peace.

So, Sunny decided to give himself a day off, for once, and enjoy that peace while it lasted.

Walking back to the stern of the ship, he summoned a certain piece of furniture and placed it a few meters away from Nephis. Sitting down on his luxurious chair, he summoned the emerald flute and brought it to his lips.

Nephis looked at him in confusion.

"What are you doing? Ah. Trying to raise the dead? But… there are no corpses on the ship…"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Who does she take me for?'

"Is it so hard to imagine that I'm just in the mood for music? Kai gave me a few lessons, you know. So I can carry a tune. He might have begged me to perform as a guest during one of Night&Gale concerts, even!"

She smiled faintly.

"I noticed you said "might have begged" instead of "begged". Hmm."

Then, her eyes widened slightly.

"...Wait. Night&Gale concerts? Are they planning a reunion? When? Is it going to be old material, or has Gale written a new album? What about new choreography?

Who is…"

Sunny lowered the flute and stared at her sullenly.

'Ah. Here she goes again, barraging me with questions…'

"Yes. I don't know, probably not. No clue. No idea. I'm not sure..."

As the sky slowly grew brighter, the Chain Breaker sailed toward dawn.

The three Masters aboard the graceful vessel anxiously awaited the reunion with two lost members of their cohort…

Chapter-1395: Hello, Blue Sky

'I wonder…'

Sunny stared at a delicious-looking golden fruit, torn between the desire to pluck it off the branch and the fear of tasting fruits from mysterious, mystical trees. The last time he had eaten one… was not a memory he liked to remember.

'It probably tastes divine, though…'

In the end, he sighed and reluctantly looked away from the alluring fruit. It was better not to test fate.

Sunny was currently high in the crown of the sacred tree, using it as a crow's nest. The sky above him was of a beautiful azure color, with not a hint of the deep scarlet splendor they had grown accustomed to in Fallen Grace.

It had already been several weeks since they visited the lost library and slayed the Defiled sybil. The fourth month of their Nightmare had ended a few days ago… of course, it had been much longer than that for Cassie and the other members of the cohort.

Effie and Jet had spent more than a year stranded in the place called Wind Flower, by now. Sunny couldn't help but worry about them.

He was also worried about Rain and the waking world, but there was nothing to be done about that.

Climbing to a higher branch, he sighed and looked down. There was usually a black crow following him around, but today, the talkative bird was gone. It was somewhere ahead, scouting for prowling abominations and turbulent currents.

The crow's presence meant that at least one of the two missing

women was still alive. That made Sunny less anxious.

In these past few weeks, The Chain Breaker had traveled far enough into the past to almost reach Wind Flower. With the help of the Guiding Light, they did not even have to waste time searching for its precise location — the sacred staff pointed directly to where they needed to go. So, the dreadful whirlpool could appear from beyond the horizon any minute now.

Of course, coming this far had not been easy. Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had to fight for their lives on many occasions. The graceful vessel had been attacked by swarms of Nightmare Creatures, grotesque giants from the deep, aerial horrors, and even heralds of the Defilement. That last battle had been especially dire, since the Defiled were both sentient and vile.

And yet, the three of them had slain and slaughtered every enemy that dared to attack the Chain Breaker… for now. The ancient vessel withstood all the attacks without receiving serious damage, as well. But the three Masters weren't as lucky — each of them had suffered many grave wounds, some of them almost fatal.

If not for Neph's healing powers, they would have never made it so far.

They wouldn't have made it without Cassie, either. Sunny had been reminded once more that traveling with an oracle was an invaluable boon. It was because of the blind girl that they had managed to avoid the true perils of the Great River — the twisted currents and lethal aberrations where time itself would have killed them in the blink of an eye.

…They would have perished without Sunny and his Shadows, as well. The Third Nightmare was not a place where one could survive without extreme battle power, and currently, he possessed the most of it out of them three.

'Am I not great?'

Sunny smiled wryly, then shuddered and furtively looked around, checking to see if the Sin of Solace was near. The sword wraith would

not have missed a chance to cut him with a snide remark in response to such thoughts, but thankfully, the apparition had not deemed it necessary to climb the sacred tree with him.

In fact, the Sin of Solace did not seem to like being too close to the tree from the Heart God's grove, for some reason. Sunny used that fact often to get some reprieve.

He sighed.

The journey to Wind Flower had not been easy, but at least they had all gotten something out of it. Nephis was one step closer to becoming a Titan, and wore a chainmail shirt over her white tunic — just like Ananke's Mantle, the new Memory could be worn in conjunction with another armor, albeit due to its unique enchantment rather than its type.

In a fashion strange for an Awakened, she also carried her sword in a scabbard hung from her belt. The scabbard was another Memory, this one capable of enhancing the weapon stored inside of it for a sufficient amount of time.

Cassie, meanwhile, was back in her beautiful red peplos dress. Now, however, there were two bracelets on her hands instead of the golden shackles — one was a protective charm Memory, the other was supposed to enhance the force of her attacks. She still carried the Quiet Dancer in a scabbard — this one mundane, not enchanted — but mostly used the Guiding Light in battle.

Although the white staff was not a Memory, it did a good job of debilitating her enemies and crushing them into pulp. Sunny was not sure that using a sacred relic to split skulls was appropriate, but he wasn't going to complain. The gods were dead, anyway.

As for himself…

Sunny had earned another five hundred shadow fragments on the way to Wind Flower, bringing him close to two thousand and five hundred — half of the amount he needed to become a Terror.

His luck with Memories, sadly, had been really bad. He had received

a few, but none of them were good enough to add to his soul arsenal. They ended up being fed to his Shadows.

He had not woven a lot of new Memories, either. In fact, Sunny had not done a lot of weaving in these past few weeks — not because there had been no time, but rather because he was currently interested in something else.

That something was giving him a lot of trouble, to the point where he often found himself dejected and stupefied. And yet, Sunny persisted with this new interest.

Chapter-1396: Approaching the Vortex

During the battle in the flooded temple, he had observed Cassie's artificial Echo in action. Even though it did not seem that powerful, that was only because their enemies that time had been of both a higher Rank and a higher Class than the blade mannequin. Sunny would not have wanted to face that thing in battle as an Awakened.

The most impressive thing about it, though, was the very fact that it was artificial.

After interrogating Cassie and Nephis on the topic, he had found out that the forgemasters of Clan Valor were capable of creating not only Memories, but also Echoes. Making one was an extremely long process, though, and one that demanded a lot of precious resources. So, there were actually very few artificial Echoes in existence, all of them belonging to the most valued members of the clan.

Nevertheless, Sunny couldn't help but wonder if he would be capable of weaving Echoes one day, as well. So, he had spent most of his free time studying the blade mannequin.

It was not going well, for now, but Sunny wasn't disheartened.

His attempts to learn the Sorcery of Names were not bearing any results, anyway. Although his horizons were somewhat expanded, being able to actually use this power seemed to be beyond him. If there was one consolation, it was that Cassie was having just as much trouble with it.

Being talentless together was less of a bitter pill to swallow.

Her mastery of runic sorcery, though, was slowly growing. In fact, there seemed to be a positive loop between the Sorcery of Names and

the Sorcery of Runes — both were founded on invoking the True Names of things, after all, albeit in a different manner. So, Cassie and Nephis were able to help each other improve.

As a result, the blind girl had indeed managed to restore some of the enchantments permeating the Chain Breaker. Just as she had told them, the graceful vessel was now once again capable of flight — it just couldn't fly for too long, or too fast. The strain of supplying the ancient ship with essence was dire enough to drain even Neph's reserves in less than a minute.

It would have to be enough to carry them to the island at the center of Wind Flower.

…Now, all they needed was to actually find it.

As Sunny stared at the horizon and tried not to feel too anxious, a swift shadow glided across the deck of the Chain Breaker. Then, a black bird landed on the branch near him.

Crow Crow was back. Strangely, though… the Echo seemed less grumpy than it had been recently. Instead, it looked excited.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What is it?"

The crow hopped a couple of times, and then cawed while spreading its wings:

"Jet! Jet!"

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Jumping down from the tree, Sunny landed noiselessly on the deck and dissolved into the shadows. A split second later, he appeared on the bow of the ship, gazing tensely at the horizon.

Saint, who was standing nearby with a bow in her hand, spared him an indifferent gaze. Her ruby eyes glowed silently, not betraying any hint of emotion.

'If only I could be this calm all the time…'

Sunny remained motionless for a few minutes, then sent mental messages to Cassie and Nephis:

[I think we are drawing close.]

Indeed, out there, far in the distance, the flowing surface of the Great River had grown a little hazy, as if obscured by mist. Considering Crow Crow's excitement, it had to be Wind Flower.

'Hurricane winds, destructive currents, and suffocating mist… we'll see how terrible that place is, exactly, very soon.'

A few moments later, Cassie joined him at the bow. Nephis remained at the stern, holding the steering oar, but she did respond through the link of the Shroud of Dusk:

[I see.]

Sunny sighed, then glanced at the blind girl. The soul shard crowning her wooden staff was glowing, its light pointing precisely at the distant haze.

"There is no doubt, then."

Cassie slowly nodded.

"Yes. We have arrived."

The branches of the sacred tree rustled as the Chain Breaker took a turn. Nephis moved the ship in a wide spiral, positioning it directly upstream of the approaching hazard. By the time she did, Sunny could already see wisps of mist flowing over the surface of the restless water.

'Time to get to work.'

Concentrating, he called upon the shadows. The three of them had long discussed how to tackle the titanic whirlpool — there was not much they had to do, really.

The first obstacle they were going to face was the repelling wind. So, Sunny lowered the sails to diminish the repelling force. The ship would be carried into the vortex by the current, and once they approached close enough, Nephis would invoke the True Name of the wind to lessen its fury.

The second obstacle would be raging currents. Sunny's authority over water was not strong enough to calm them, but the Chain Breaker was sturdy enough to withstand the fury of the elements. It was not going to overturn, either — all they needed was a skilled helmsman and something to guide them through the mist.

Cassie was going to accomplish both tasks with a little help from the Guiding Light. She was quite skilled in controlling the Chain Breaker — more than any of them were.

However, she was not going to be able to guide the flying ship through the last, and most dangerous, of obstacles.

Once they were close enough to the island at the center of the vortex but not deep enough into the whirlpool to be swallowed by it, the Chain Breaker had to lift into the air and reach the shore before its helmsman ran out of essence. Nephis was a Terror, and possessed the lineage of Sun God as well — which, among other things, drastically strengthened her soul.

Her reserve of essence was the largest among them, so it would be her task to take up the steering oars in those last moments.

…As the first wisps of grey mist touched the bow of the Chain Breaker, Sunny suppressed a shiver and looked into the approaching wall of fog with a dark expression.

Mist, mist… nothing good ever happened when there was mist around. Here in the Dream Realm, it was always a herald of something dreadful approaching.

'We have prepared for this.'

Taking a deep breath, he glanced at Cassie and smiled.

"Let's go find Effie and Jet, then."

Chapter-1397: Wishful Thinking

Soon, the Chain Breaker was swallowed by the mist. The winds had grown stronger, making the folds of Sunny's nebulous mantle flutter. Feeling drops of water fall on his face, he sighed and looked at Cassie.

"Go."

She lingered for a moment, then rushed away to replace Nephis at the steering oar. Sunny was left alone on the bow, looking into the mist with a dark expression on his face.

'Effie, Jet…'

Both of them were still alive. They had to be.

But how could they?

The Third Nightmare was not easy to survive. And these two… they, of all people, would have found it impossible to cling to life while stranded for more than a year on an isolated island.

Jet could only exist by killing living beings to replenish her constantly dwindling essence, after all. Effie was a slave to inhuman hunger. Without access to a great amount of food, she would swiftly wither and die.

How many foes to kill could there have been on a hidden island, and how much food?

'No… don't think about that.'

The crow Echo still existed, which meant at least one of them was still…

"That crow has always been a bit strange, though. Much too animated

for a simple Echo. Perhaps it has something to do with Wake of Ruin… so who's to say that it can't exist without a Master?"

Sunny threw a dark glance at the Sin of Solace, who grinned in response.

"Admit it, they are both probably dead already. Ah, how sad… they were slowly starving to death while you were having fun with Nephis on the dark island. You really took it easy back then, at the beginning, didn't you?"

Sunny looked away and gritted his teeth. The sword wraith simply laughed.

"Come to think of it, your friend Kai is most likely dead, too. Even if the Nightmare Creatures did not kill him, Mordret surely did. He is probably walking around now, wearing Kai's corpse right as a luxury brand suit. Well… it's for the best. You have always been jealous of that guy, anyway. The insecure little wretch that you are."

The surface of the Great River was growing restless. The waves were already much taller than before, making the bow of the Chain Breaker sway. Feeling the deck rise and fall beneath him, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

"...That's not true. Kai has Anvil's charm — I gave it to him. Mordret can't possess someone wearing that charm."

The Sin of Solace stared at him for a few moments, a mocking smile on his lips.

"The charm, right… it protected Welthe really well, huh?"

Snarling, Sunny turned around and prepared to rebuke the apparition, but at that moment, a calm voice resounded from behind them:

"Are you talking to your sword again?"

He flinched and looked back. Neph's slender figure slowly revealed itself from the mist, two pristine white sparks burning in her cold grey eyes. He hesitated for a moment, then nodded silently.

Stopping once she reached him, Nephis looked into the mist and said, her voice even:

"I believe that they are all alive, too."

A bitter smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

"Sure… but it seems like wishful thinking, doesn't it?"

People were not immortal. He had lost enough comrades to know how ruthless this world they lived in was, so wasn't it a bit naive? To stubbornly cling to hope after Antarctica...

Nephis shook her head.

"On the contrary. I think there is a valid and logical reason to believe that all members of the cohort are not dead yet."

She put her hand on the hilt of her sword and said calmly:

"The Six Plagues exist. They are most likely the future versions of the six of you… therefore, none of you is likely to be dead in the present. Otherwise, their existence can't be explained."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

"That is… strangely reassuring, in a morbid kind of way. You can't die yet because you're destined to become a Defiled monster, huh? What a paradox."

Neph's logic assumed that the future was predetermined. If so, there was no way that Effie and Jet were gone. However, that also meant that there was no way for the six of them to avoid killing her and becoming the Six Plagues… which made this whole endeavor meaningless.

If the future was not predetermined, though, then the cohort could potentially write a different ending for themselves and the Nightmare. Yet it also meant that there was no reason to believe that the rest of the members were still alive.

Sunny knew that fate could hardly be changed… but he also knew

that it did not govern every small occurrence and event. The details of what happened, and how it did, could be altered — it was just that the end result almost always remained the same. Sooner or later, all deviations were proven meaningless, failing to change the grand design of the future.

It was easier to change fate inside of a Nightmare, as well, due to its fragmented and isolated nature. Plus, the Great River was a strange place.

Who was to say that their fate wasn't to become the Six Plagues, only for their younger selves to slay them and conquer the Nightmare unscathed?

'Ah. My head hurts.'

He rubbed his face. All this stuff — the paradoxical nature of the Great River, the unreliable future, the greater tapestry of fate — were too strange and irrational for a human mind to comprehend. The best they could do was just try to do their best at the moment and strive to reach the desired outcome, ignoring the confusing reality of the Tomb of Ariel as much as possible.

…The winds were growing stronger. The branches of the sacred tree swayed, rustling worriedly. The swaying of the deck grew more pronounced.

A thick mist enveloped everything in sight.

"Hey, Sunny…"

He looked at Nephis, surprised by her strangely candid tone, and raised an eyebrow.

...Knowing her, some ridiculous statement was about to follow. He was not going to be fooled into listening to her apologize for his projector twice.

But Nephis was perfectly earnest:

"There is nothing wrong with a bit of wishful thinking. We will find them both alive. I'm sure of it."

At that moment, the wind slammed into them like a ram, making both sway.

Raising a hand, Sunny caught Nephis and helped her steady herself. At the same time, he used the Feather of Truth trait of the Shell to increase his weight and ground himself more solidly on the deck.

The two of them remained silent for a few moments, looking into each other's eyes. Then, Sunny smiled.

"Alright, Neph… I'll believe you, this time."

Chapter-1398: Braving the Barrier

Soon, they were deep into the barrier surrounding Wind Flower. There was nothing but blinding mist, hurricane winds, and violent currents in this dreadful and deadly place. Sunny could easily imagine countless ships being drowned by the inconceivable whirlpool... powerful Nightmare Creatures, as well.

No wonder almost no one returned after being swallowed by the mist.

And yet...

The fury of the wind was terrible — but not terrible enough to sway them. Nephis had invoked the True Name of the wind, lessening the pressure on the graceful ship. The Chain Breaker stubbornly cut through the mist, refusing to be pushed back.

The violence of the raging currents was daunting — but not daunting enough to stop them. Guided by Cassie's steady hand, the Chain Breaker broke through the fortress wall of the towering waves, never straying off course.

By then, the natural flow of the Great River was replaced entirely by a terrifying tide that was pulling them deeper and deeper into the mist. The deck beneath their feet was tilted downward, indicating that they were sliding into the giant, insatiable maw of the colossal whirlpool.

Instead of allowing the ship to be carried by the current, Cassie kept its bow pointed perpendicular to the rush of seething water, cutting as short a line to the center of the vortex as possible. It took a lot of effort to keep the Chain Breaker under control, but she managed it splendidly.

It was still too early to take to the sky.

Sunny and Nephis had long joined Cassie at the stern. Fiend and Crow Crow were hiding under the sacred tree, both soaked in water and miserable, while Nightmare had dissolved into shadows and hid in their dark embrace. Only Saint remained on the bow of the ship, standing there like an immovable onyx statue. The plume of her helmet danced in the wind.

It was easy to get lost in the mist, but the radiance of the Guiding Light was showing them the way.

Straining against the howling wind, Sunny yelled:

"How much longer?!"

His shout was swallowed by the mist.

At almost the same time, though, the veil of fog was torn apart for a few brief moments.

When Sunny saw the scale and magnitude of the vortex they were trying to brave, his face turned ashen. The whirlpool was indeed colossal, stretching as far as the eye could see. The raging tide moved in a vast circle, forming a revolving crater. They were currently sliding recklessly down its slope.

Far away and below them, a harrowing darkness devoured the world. The depths of the Great River lay naked and revealed, but his human eyes were not capable of discerning what dwelled below.

Or maybe there was nothing there at all. Just an endless, bottomless abyss.

However, there was an island hovering in the air above the darkness. Flowing mist shrouded its dark cliffs, and a magnificent tower rose from somewhere far inland, obscured by fog.

The sight of the island was both austere and sinister, like a stark omen of ill fate.

"Hurry!"

Cassie let go of the steering oar and stepped out of the circle, allowing Nephis to take her place. Neph was there a split second later. She took both steering oars and looked ahead, white flames dancing in her eyes.

Then, her radiant essence poured into the runic circle, flooding the enchantments of the ancient vessel with incinerating power.

Sunny yelped and grabbed a railing. In the next moment, the Chain Breaker shook slightly… and soared into the air.

'It… it's working!'

The graceful vessel was not flying nearly as fast as it had been able to before, and its flight was not nearly as smooth. But they were indeed in the air, moving toward the distant island.

When Cassie and the Fire Keepers had restored the ancient flying ship to a shadow of its former glory, it had already been an incredible feat. But that had taken them almost a year, with dozens of people lending a hand. The fact that the blind girl now managed to achieve so much alone and in the span of a few weeks was truly remarkable.

And it gave them the chance to accomplish their goal.

Of course, it was still unclear if the Chain Breaker would be able to maintain its flight for long enough. Would they reach Wind Flower island?

Or would they plummet into the darkness and be crushed by the dreadful vortex?

'Only one way to find out…'

Sunny turned his head and looked at Nephis, who was holding the steering oars, her eyes shining with a brilliant white radiance. He could sense a flood of essence pouring out of her soul like a shining torrent… that essence was absorbed by the runic circle and flowed through the enchanted lines stretching throughout the ship, feeding its enchantments with power.

There was no hint of doubt on Neph's face, and so, he decided to

throw away his doubts, as well.

A few moments later, the shroud of mist obscured everything once again. Only the glow of the Guiding Light was there to show them the way… the Chain Breaker sailed through the blinding fog, with only the rustle of countless leaves proving that the sacred tree still existed somewhere out there, near them, hidden from sight.

'Come on, come on…'

They didn't have to struggle against the current anymore, but the hurricane winds were still raging. They slammed into the hull of the ship with vicious force, trying to push it back.

Because of it, the speed of the Chain Breaker fell even more.

'Damn it!'

Sunny had been counting the seconds. It had already been a full minute since the moment Nephis stepped into the circle… more than they had been able to fly in the tentative test the day before.

The radiance of her eyes was dimming

And yet…

Suddenly, Nephis moved and smoothly raised one of the oars. At the same time, the Chain Breaker began to descend.

Gradually, the fury of the winds was extinguished.

The mist was still obscuring the world…

But then, the ancient vessel finally fell onto soft, white sand.

There was a violent crash, but the hull of the Chain Breaker withstood the impact. The runic circle fell dormant once again, and the enchantments lost all power. There was nothing but mist around them... and silence.

They had reached Wind Flower.

Chapter-1399: Misty Shore

Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly. It had shattered the side of a black cliff and was now leaning on it, which prevented the ship from turning over. They had gotten lucky despite the blind landing.

The fog was still there, obscuring the world, but it had become less thick. Sunny could make out the figure of Saint standing still on the bow of the beached vessel, as well as more cliffs rising high above them. It seemed that Nephis had guided the Chain Breaker to a small strip of sand at the very edge of the island.

Changing Star herself was leaning heavily on the steering oars. Her face was paler than usual, and the white flames were gone from her eyes — she had completely exhausted her essence to carry the ship across the dark abyss.

Sunny grimaced. It was very unfortunate to have one of them utterly drained of essence right now. No one knew what dangers were waiting for them on the misty shore… these first minutes could very well prove to be of vital importance.

Not that there had been a choice.

"I'm fine."

Noticing his gaze, Nephis forced out a faint smile and put a hand on the hilt of her sword.

"I can still put up a fight."

Sunny nodded, having no doubt in her ability to do just that, despite

this weakened state. She was a seasoned slayer. Nevertheless, they had to be careful not to allow themselves to be wounded — it would be quite a while before Nephis could heal them again.

Cassie used the Guiding Light to pick herself off the deck and shivered slightly as the mist caressed her skin. Her expression was troubled. Noticing it, Sunny tensed as well.

"What is it?"

The blind girl had an intuition that was far superior to even his. It had saved their lives numerous times, so seeing her this nervous was not a good sight.

She lingered for a while, then shook her head with a frown.

"I'm… not sure. I just have a very ominous feeling. This place, Wind Flower… every part of me is screaming that we are in danger."

Come to think of it, he felt it too. An invisible, dark pressure emanating from all around them. All his instincts were telling him one thing — that there were dreadful predators somewhere close. Much more dreadful than even he himself was.

Sunny scowled.

"Aren't we always in danger?"

Despite saying those words nonchalantly, he summoned the Sin of Solace and called upon his Shadows. Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare got closer, surrounding the three Masters in a defensive formation.

Nephis had walked to the edge of the deck and was now peering into the fog, her expression impassive. After a few moments of silence, she turned to Cassie and said:

"Do it."

They had discussed what to do a long time ago. The first thing, unless they were attacked immediately after landing, was to make use of the Guiding Light.

None of them really understood how the divine relic worked, but they had established that it could point them in the direction of not only Wind Flower, but also Effie… or, at least, its tip lit up when the person holding the staff thought about her.

However, it did not react the same way to Jet. That fact… had been a source of many dark thoughts for Sunny.

As Crow Crow landed on his shoulder, Cassie gripped the wooden staff tighter. Then, she lingered for a moment.

"Huh… that's strange."

Sunny glanced at the Guiding Light, which was still pointing to somewhere deep in the mist, and raised an eyebrow.

"What? It seems to be working just fine."

The blind girl shook her head.

"No, nothing. It's just that I have not asked it to find Effie yet. The light should still be pointing to Wind Flower… I thought it would disappear once we reached it."

She concentrated for a moment, and then the radiance of the enchanted crystal changed subtly. It was still pointing deeper inland, but at a different angle.

Sunny secretly let out a sigh of relief. He did not know if the Guiding Light truly pointed to Effie, her lifeless body, or something else entirely. And yet, seeing it shine was a relief.

'That gluttonous woman… she'd better be alive. Or else... or else I'll be very cross with her.'

He scowled, then took a step forward.

"Let's go, then."

Jumping over the railing, he plummeted down and landed on the sand. A moment later, Nephis was by his side. Saint and Fiend landed with a bit more noise than the two of them, and lastly, Nightmare

leaped from the deck of the ship, carrying Cassie on his back.

The six of them remained motionless for a few moments, listening to the silence of Wind Flower.

There were no sounds around them, no movement. Only the soft white sand and the black cliffs faintly visible in the fog. A piece of rock fell from the shattered crag and rolled down, the noise both dampened and made louder by the mist. It echoes, making them tense.

Sunny took a deep breath. His vision was obstructed by the fog, and strangely enough, so was his shadow sense. It was not entirely gone, but the range was limited to about as far as he could see. Beyond that, the shadows felt vague and unreliable.

He didn't like being that vulnerable at all.

At least the fog itself did not feel dangerous. It was a nuisance, sure, but far from being as senselessly terrifying as the mists of the Hollow Mountains.

'Curse it all…'

Frowning, Sunny took a step forward.

…As he did, a human figure suddenly revealed itself from the murky veil of the fog.

He flinched to tensed, ready to attack, but then froze.

Black eyes, porcelain skin… the Sin of Solace was looking at him mockingly.

"What, did I scare you? Ah, how tiresome."

It was the damned apparition.

Sunny gritted his teeth and walked past the sword wraith, heading straight for the cliffs.

At the same time, he sent three of his five shadows in different

directions, ordering them to cautiously scout ahead.

'Slow and steady… slow and steady…'

Effie and Jet had already been on this island for more than a year. They would have to wait for a few hours, or even days, more. If Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie were too hasty and proceeded recklessly, they could very well die before finding the lost members of the cohort.

He was not going to underestimate the perils of Wind Flower.

…But he was going to find his friends, no matter what.

'There can't be any mistakes…'

Chapter-1400: Footprints in the Sand

As Sunny's shadows climbed the cliffs, he and his companions cautiously advanced up the beach. Even the crow, who had been anxious and impatient to find its master all this time, seemed wary and subdued. The black bird was sitting on Sunny's shoulder, its feathers raised, and kept silent.

The mist swirled silently around them. Saint and Fiend were in the rear, both ready to defend against an unexpected attack at any moment. Sunny and Nephis were in the middle. Cassie rode Nightmare at the front of the group, her back straight. The radiance of the Guiding Light that she held up illuminated the way.

At some point, the shadow steed suddenly stopped. Sunny gripped the hilt of the Sin of Solace tighter and said in a low voice:

"What is it?"

Cassie remained motionless for a moment, then pointed the sacred staff down, at the ground. When Sunny and Nephis approached, they immediately understood why.

Out there in the white sand, hidden in the mist, was a line of lonesome footprints. Sunny kneeled to study them, a frown appearing on his face.

"Those were left by a human."

Neph's voice echoed in the fog.

He nodded slightly.

Indeed, the shallow prints left in the sand belonged to a human. From

the look of it, someone had walked across the beach, barefoot… it was hard to tell the gender of the person just from these traces, but they could not have been of a very large stature — both the size and the depths of the footprints proved otherwise.

The traces also looked fresh. They could not have been left more than a few hours ago.

Sunny felt a cold chill creeping up his spine.

…Who was taking barefoot walks in this harrowing place?

There was another strange detail about the footprints. Contrary to what Sunny would have expected, the line of them came from the direction of the cliffs and disappeared in the mist, heading toward the edge of the island.

And yet, they had not met or heard anyone on their way here.

He hesitated for a few moments, then looked at Nephis and said:

"Wait here."

Leaving one shadow behind to step out of it should the need arise, Sunny stood up and followed the footprints into the fog. Soon, his companions disappeared from view, and he was left alone in the swirling mist.

'Ah… I don't like it.'

If not for the fact that he could still see them through the shadow, Sunny would have been tempted to turn back.

A few minutes later, he reached the end of the beach. The edge of the island opened into an abyssal chasm, the view of the colossal whirlpool and the darkness hiding below obscured by the fog. Sunny felt something he had not felt for a long time… a sense of vertigo.

'Come now, really… I can turn into a bird. Is it really necessary to be afraid of heights?'

He sighed and shook his head.

The footprints led to the very end of the island. There, the lonesome line of them disappeared, as if the person who had left it behind leaped off the edge into the misty abyss.

Sunny was suddenly overcome by strange melancholy.

"Why don't you try jumping, too?"

He slowly looked at the Sin of Solace, who was standing at the very edge, looking into the fog with a distant expression.

"No thanks."

The sword wraith smiled.

"Why not? You said it yourself, you can turn into a bird. Hey, maybe this person knew how to fly, too."

Sunny sighed and nodded.

"Right. I should watch the sky… well, watch the fog above. Aerial attacks are some of the most nasty."

As he was walking back to Nephis and Cassie, Sunny was thinking about the footprints in the sand. Who had left them behind? Had that person really jumped off the edge? If so, why? Were they swallowed by the dark abyss?

It seemed like… such a shame.

If the Chain Breaker arrived at Wind Flower a few hours earlier, they could have met this person. How bitter would it be, to arrive at an island from where no one could return on the same day that its inhabitant had decided to take their own life?

Maybe they had not, though. Maybe they really had soared into the sky and escaped this forlorn place… he could not be sure.

One thing he was sure about, though, was that the footprints did not belong to Effie or Jet. Effie was too tall to have left them behind, while Jet… Jet would have never chosen to end her life, after everything she had done to preserve it. She had literally climbed out

of a grave and endured being dead, all to continue living. Would a person like that ever give up?

Sunny had no doubt that she would not.

By the time he reunited with Nephis and Cassie, his shadows had already scaled the cliffs. In front of them was a dark forest of tall pine trees, mist swirling between the ancient trunks. One shadow cautiously glided to the left, another to the right, while the last one continued to advance forward, in the direction of the distant tower.

The island was large — much larger than the islands of the Chained Isles were — so exploring it was going to take a lot of time. Especially because Sunny wanted to be careful and not expose his shadows to any danger.

'It's going to take days… weeks, maybe. Damn it.'

There was no sign of Effie and Jet.

"The footprints lead to the edge of the island. I didn't find anything else, so… let's trace them in the other direction."

Cassie raised the Guiding Light again, and they moved along the line of footprints toward the cliffs. They advanced slowly and cautiously, never letting their guard down. Although nothing had attacked them yet, the quiet feeling of danger was growing more dire and terrifying with each step.

Eventually, they arrived in front of a vertical wall of black rock. The footprints disappeared once again, this time in front of narrow stairs cut into the cliffside. The steps led all the way to the forest, by the looks of it.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other. The stone stairs were too narrow to maintain their formation… if something attacked them while they were ascending the steps, they would have to fight in a very awkward position.

"Fiend, take the lead."

The steel ogre was the most resilient out of them, so he was going to

serve as the shield of the cohort. The Shadow did not seem too concerned with his task, either — with dark flames burning in his eyes, he moved to the front of the formation and stepped onto the first step.

As they climbed the stairs, Sunny walked behind Nephis. At some point, he noticed that she was paying a lot of attention to the stone steps disappearing beneath their feet.

"What are you thinking about?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said evenly:

"These are man-made."

Sunny nodded. After a short pause, Neph added:

"Which means that they must have been cut from stone by the Seeker who lived on this island."

It was a logical conclusion. Sunny glanced at the stone steps, thinking about how ancient they were.

Then, he scowled.

"You noticed it, too?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then answered Neph's question with another nod.

These stairs were strange. They were supposed to be ancient, and yet, there was no sign of corrosion on them. The steps were not weathered and ground down by the endless assault of the elements… instead, they were perfectly preserved and sharp, as if someone had cut them just yesterday.

'Is this rock indestructible, or are there strange things happening to time on this island?'

Sunny wanted to examine this question further, but at that moment…

He froze.

Out there, far ahead, the shadow he had sent toward the tower heard a sound. Although it was muffled by the mist, Sunny would never fail to recognize it.

It was the sound of steel clashing against steel, followed by a scream of pain.

At the same moment, the crow that had been sitting silently on his shoulder suddenly jumped into the air and shot forward, instantly disappearing into the fog.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Jet!'

Chapter-1401: One of Those Situations

Sunny had recognized the voice. There was no doubt that the person screaming in pain in the depths of the forest was Jet… she was so close!

And in danger.

He hesitated for a moment.

'Bad, bad…'

His intuition was telling him that something absolutely deadly waited for him in the mist. Blindly rushing forward could very well invite disaster. And more than that, the scream itself was suspicious…

Was Soul Reaper Jet someone to scream from pain? No, she wasn't. Sunny had seen her maintain composure while impaled on a jagged piece of alloy. Someone… something could have been mimicking her voice to lure them into a trap.

He had met creatures that lived in the mist and mimicked human voices before, after all. The memory alone was enough to make him shudder.

And yet…

What if it really was her? If there was something on the island that had made Jet shriek in agony, then the danger she faced was truly dire. There was no time to hesitate at all.

"Sunny?"

He flinched, then looked at Nephis somberly. Despite Sunny's shaken

state, he knew that he had already made the decision.

His voice was steady when he spoke:

"Someone is fighting in the forest, about four kilometers from the top of the stairs. It should be Jet. I'm going."

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded calmly and unsheathed her sword.

"We'll be right behind you, then."

As Cassie commanded the Guiding Light to point its radiance to where Sunny was instead of Effie, he dove into the shadows.

'I'm doing something very dangerous…'

Throughout the years, Sunny had often been forced to take unacceptable risks. But that was only because his back had been against the wall, and the circumstances had not allowed him to make a different choice.

If possible, he preferred to win every battle before it even started, or at least get as close to ensuring the favorable result as possible. Observing his enemy, making careful preparations, dictating the ebb and flow of the battle… that was where he felt the most comfortable, and where his Aspect truly shined.

Right now, Sunny had no idea what enemy he was going to face, was rushing into battle without having made any preparations, and did not hold any initiative at all.

Much worse, he was doing all these things here, in the depths of the Third Nightmare, surrounded by the mists of Wind Flower — it was hard to imagine a place more perilous than that.

'It's just one of those situations where I only have bad choices. It's going to be alright, though… I've survived all the previous gambles, so I'll pull through this time, as well!'

Stepping out of the shadow that had heard Jet's voice, Sunny gave it an order to wrap itself around him and dashed into the mist with as

much speed as he could muster. At the same time, he called the other two scouting shadows back.

It was going to take a bit of time for them to return, but still… he preferred to plan ahead.

Tearing through the fog, Sunny swiftly traversed the remaining distance to the place where the scream had come from. Soon, he broke free of the pine trees and entered a wide clearing.

The everpresent fog was a bit thinner here, allowing him to see a dozen meters or so in all directions. Sunny dug his heels into the soft moss and slid for a few meters before coming to a halt.

The Sin of Solace was already raised, ready to strike.

…But there was no movement around him.

Sunny froze for a split second, scanning the misty clearing. He didn't see or sense any enemies, at least not in the small area he could perceive. What he did sense, however… was the familiar smell of blood.

'There!'

Out there in front of him, hidden by fog, a figure was slumped on the ground.

Dashing forward, Sunny approached the figure and staggered.

'C—curse it…'

It was indeed Jet. However, she was… she was…

Her black leather armor seemed unbroken, and yet, Soul Reaper's beautiful face was contorted in a grimace of pure agony. A moment later, Sunny noticed a strange incongruity about her… looking closer, he understood that Jet's right arm was laying a bit too far from her body.

It had been viciously severed near the shoulder. The hand was still clutched into a fist, but the glaive gripped in it was broken, already

dissipating into a stream of white sparks.

The moss was greedily absorbing dark, steaming blood.

His chest suddenly felt constricted.

'N—neph has not recovered her essence yet…'

As he thought that, Jet suddenly opened her eyes. They had always been icy and blue, but now, the blue color had become so intense that it almost seemed as if it was glowing in the dim twilight of the misty island.

There was a hint of recognition in her dazed gaze. Her lips moved, but Sunny failed to discern the barely audible whisper.

'Hold on, Jet! Hold on…'

Kneeling in front of her, he lowered his head and listened.

Jet's voice was weak and hoarse:

"Sunny… be… behind you… fog…"

His eyes widened.

A split second later, he was already moving.

Jumping to his feet, Sunny spun and brandished the Sin of Solace. He only had enough time to notice a vague shape in the swirling mist, elusive and ethereal, as if made out of the fog itself. The world around him was suddenly terribly cold, the breath escaping from his mouth as steam.

'Got you.'

The jade blade of the cursed jian sliced through the ethereal figure without meeting any resistance. Sunny was used to the feeling of the flesh of his enemies parting before the white jade like water, so he wasn't too surprised.

However… something was wrong.

Cursing, he jumped back, narrowly avoiding being grasped by the misty apparition. Cold sweat appeared on his face.

Sunny had no reason to believe so, but he felt as if he had just avoided certain death.

'What the…'

His thoughts were moving quickly. The Sin of Solace had passed through the enemy, but the enemy easily shrugged off the attack. How could it be?

'Elusive, ethereal, seemingly woven out of fog… an incorporeal enemy.'

This was not the first time he had faced murderous wraiths and ghost-like abominations. Grimacing, Sunny let go of the hilt of his cursed sword and allowed it to fall to the ground.

Luckily, he had a weapon perfectly capable of destroying intangible foes… the [Ghost Blade] enchantment of the Cruel Sight allowed it to do just that.

Now, he just had to survive a few seconds until the somber spear manifested itself.

The problem was that he could not see the mist wraith anymore. After attacking once, it dissolved into the swirling fog, becoming utterly invisible. The next strike could come at any moment, from any direction.

The gloomy and happy shadows were already approaching from two different directions. Very soon, they would reach the clearing and augment his speed even more… this battle was not going to be as hard then.

'Now, I just need to…'

"Sunny…"

Jet's hoarse voice resounded from below, but he didn't allow himself to look down. All his focus was concentrated on the swirling mist,

watching for the signs of the next attack.

"Be… careful… she's…"

Finally, the Cruel Sight appeared in his hand, instantly igniting with the radiance of divine flame. The fog around the silver blade seethed, evaporating. At almost the same time, the happy shadow reached the clearing and burst from the line of trees, flying toward him with incredible speed. The gloomy shadow was not far behind.

The mist moved.

'Huh?'

Strangely enough, the wraith was not lunging at him. Instead, it was at the edge of the clearing, moving to… intercept…

'No!'

Suddenly, harrowing pain tore through Sunny's mind and body. Letting out a bestial wail, he fell to one knee, clutching at his chest.

"Aargh! Aaaa!!"

It was an agony unlike anything he had ever experienced.

As Sunny watched with disbelieving eyes, his vision blurry, the happy shadow was out there, in front of him… impaled on a ghostly blade. Once lively and joyful, it was now empty and hollow.

Dead.

The Spell whispered solemnly into his ear:

[Your shadow has been destroyed.]

[Your shadow core has been destroyed.]

'G—gloomy!'

Sunny was paralyzed by pain, but he tried to move nevertheless. However, it was too late.

The mist wraith was suddenly on the opposite side of the clearing, and he was brought to the ground by another wave of unimaginable, killing torment.

[Your shadow… has…]

[Your… core… destroyed…]

His soul was severely damaged. Two of his shadow cores had shattered, and his soul was falling apart.

'No, no, no…'

Letting out a tortured howl, Sunny struggled to stand up. But all he managed was to rise to one knee.

It was then that he felt a cold presence looming above him.

Looking up, he saw it…

Two icy blue eyes, looking down at him with inhuman coldness.

Laying on the ground, Jet whispered in a voice that was like a dying flame:

"...me."

Then, a ghostly blade pierced Sunny's chest.

It passed through the dark fabric of Ananke's Mantle and the black silk of the Shroud of Dusk as if they were no obstacles at all. Neither Marble Shell nor Bone Weave offered it any resistance, either.

The blade did not cut Sunny's skin, nor did it sever his flesh.

Instead, it struck directly at his lightless soul.

Already damaged, it crumbled from that single strike.

...That was how Sunny had been slain by Undying Slaughter of the Six Plagues.

For the first time.

Chapter-1402: Sunny Waited for a Moment

…Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly. It had shattered the side of a black cliff and was now leaning on it, which prevented the ship from turning over. They had gotten lucky despite the blind landing.

The fog was still there, obscuring the world, but it had become less thick. Sunny could make out the figure of Saint standing still on the bow of the grounded vessel, as well as more cliffs rising high above them. It seemed that Nephis had guided the Chain Breaker to a small sand beach at the very edge of the island.

Neph herself was leaning heavily on the steering oars, drained of essence. Sunny grimaced.

'It was inevitable, but we should be careful not to receive any serious wounds. She won't be able to heal us any time soon.'

Nephis, meanwhile, had already regained her composure.

"I'm fine. I can still put up a fight."

'Well, of course you can. I have no doubt about that.'

After exchanging a few words with them, Cassie used the Guiding Light to make it point in the direction where Effie supposedly was.

'Or her lifeless body… or something else entirely.'

Sunny couldn't suppress his anxiety anymore. He scowled and took a

step forward, ready to leap down to the beach.

'That gluttonous woman… she'd better be alive. Or else... or else I'll be very cross with her.'

Jumping over the railing, he plummeted down and landed on the sand. A moment later, Nephis was by his side. Saint and Fiend landed with a bit more noise than the two of them, and lastly, Nightmare leaped from the deck of the ship, carrying Cassie on his back.

The six of them remained motionless for a few moments, listening to the silence of Wind Flower.

There were no sounds around them, no movement. Only the soft white sand and the black cliffs faintly visible in the fog. A piece of rock fell from the shattered crag and rolled down, the noise both dampened and made louder by the mist. It echoed, making them tense.

Feeling very uncomfortable because of how suppressed both his vision and shadow sense were, Sunny took a step forward.

…As he did, a human figure suddenly revealed itself from the murky veil of the fog.

He flinched and tensed, ready to attack, but then froze.

Black eyes, porcelain skin… the Sin of Solace looked at him contemptuously and spat:

"Gods. This again! I'm so sick of it…"

Sunny gritted his teeth and walked past the damned sword wraith…

But then he lingered for a moment.

Suddenly, a strange sense of déjà vu overcame him.

'Huh…'

Why did he feel as if the Sin of Solace was supposed to say something else?

Shaking his head, Sunny ignored the loathsome apparition and headed straight for the cliffs.

…Less than an hour later, he was writhing on the ground, overwhelmed by unbearable agony. His lightless soul was mutilated and slowly falling apart.

As Sunny arduously rose to one knee, a cold gaze pierced him from above.

'No, no, no…'

Then, a ghostly blade pierced his chest.

Sunny died.

***

…Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly. Nephis was leaning heavily on the steering oars, utterly drained of essence.

'We should be careful not to get wounded until she recovers some essence.'

She straightened slowly and said in a tired voice:

"I'm fine. I can still put up a fight."

'Well, of course you can. You're Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan."

They exchanged a few words with Cassie, who then used the Guiding Light to point them in the direction where Effie was supposed to be. Soon, Sunny jumped down to the beach, followed by the rest of his companions.

'That gluttonous woman… she'd better be alive. Or else... or else I'll be very cross with her.'

Feeling vulnerable in the swirling mist, he scowled and took a step forward.

…As he did, a human figure suddenly revealed itself from the murky veil of the fog.

Sunny flinched and tensed, ready to attack, but then froze.

Black eyes, porcelain skin… the Sin of Solace was glaring at him without even trying to conceal his hatred.

"You are such a pathetic, odious, revolting coward. Just die already, die… gods, this is unbearable!"

Sunny gritted his teeth and walked past the damned sword wraith, heading for the cliffs. He was suddenly overcome by a strange sense of déjà vu.

'Weird… what did that bastard say?'

Banishing the thought of the damnable sword wraith from his head, he continued forward.

Soon after, a ghostly blade pierced his chest.

Sunny died in agony.

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…Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly. Nephis was leaning on the steering oars, utterly drained of essence…

A minute or two later, he jumped down to the beach and headed to the cliffs. As he did, a pale apparition suddenly appeared from the mist, scaring him.

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Damn, damn… it was fun at the start, but now I've already lost

count…"

Ignoring the odious wraith, Sunny continued walking. He was suddenly overwhelmed but a strange sense of déjà vu, but dismissed it.

Not long after that, his soul was destroyed by the ruthless blade of Undying Slaughter.

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…Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

…Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

…Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

He died in agony.

He died in agony.

He died in agony.

He died.

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The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly. Nephis was leaning on the steering oars, utterly drained of essence.

After Cassie used the Guiding Light to point them in the direction where Effie was supposed to be, Sunny jumped down to the beach and headed toward the cliffs.

As he did, a pale apparition appeared from the mist and scared him.

The Sin of Solace glared at him silently, not saying anything.

'What is up with that bastard?'

Ignoring the loathsome wraith, Sunny walked past and advanced cautiously through the fog. A strange sense of déjà vu suddenly overwhelmed him, but he dismissed it.

'Slow and steady… slow and steady…'

However, something was still gnawing on his mind.

Scowling, Sunny stopped, lingered for a few moments, and turned around.

"Hey, you. Weren't you going to say something?"

Nephis looked at him with a hint of surprise.

"Are you talking to your sword?"

Sunny nodded and continued staring at the Sin of Solace, who silently glared at him back.

'Why do I feel so strange?'

He remained motionless for a while, his expression growing darker. Eventually, Sunny uttered a curse and shook his head.

"Hold on. I… I think something is not right…"

Chapter-1403: Deja Vu

Because of Sunny, they spent more time near the Chain Breaker than they had planned. However, he simply couldn't tell what it was that had made him feel so uncomfortable. After a while, there was no choice but to head for the cliffs.

Cassie rode Nightmare at the front of the group, Sunny and Nephis followed, while Saint and Fiend were defending the rear. As they walked, Sunny remained silent, a deep frown on his face.

'I just… I feel strange.'

It was as if he had taken these steps before. The white sand, the swirling mist, the black edifices of the tall cliffs… it all felt eerily familiar.

'What is going on?'

Eventually, they discovered a line of footprints in the sand. Sunny should have felt surprised and curious, but he barely paid the mysterious discovery any attention. As if it was only natural for the footprints to be there.

"Those were left by a human."

He shivered slightly and looked at Nephis. How had he known that she would say these exact words?

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then said quietly:

"Wait here."

Why did he feel almost… obligated to respond that way?

Deeply disturbed, Sunny left one of his shadows behind and followed the line of footprints to the edge of the island. There were so many

questions he should have been asking himself… like who had left these traces? Had that person really jumped into the abyssal chasm? Or had they survived and escaped the suffocating mist?

But instead, Sunny was mostly thinking about why it felt as if he had already visited the edge of the island before.

The Sin of Solace was there, as well, glaring at him silently.

'Why is he not saying anything? I feel like he should have said something already. Like encourage me to jump, too.'

Scowling, Sunny returned to Nephis and Cassie.

"The footprints lead to the edge of the island. I didn't find anything else, so… let's trace them in the other direction."

When they nodded and prepared to set out, he suddenly added:

"Wait, don't you… don't you feel that something is strange?"

Nephis looked at him with her usual impassive expression.

"Everything here is strange."

Sunny had no choice but to agree. It was a stupid question, to begin with… of course, everything felt strange on a mystical island hidden behind a barrier of a colossal whirlpool.

They continued forward and eventually reached stone steps leading up the hills. Fiend took the lead, and the group cautiously started the ascent. As they walked, Sunny couldn't shake off the feeling that these steps looked eerily familiar.

'Just what the hell is going on with me… am I under some kind of mind hex again?'

By now, Sunny's resistance to mental attack was rather high. Even the Sin of Solace, a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, was having trouble driving him truly and utterly insane. He did not doubt that there were beings in the Tomb of Ariel that could shatter his defenses… but he did doubt that there was something here that could

do so without him noticing.

'Then what is it?'

Looking up, he noticed that Nephis was staring intently at the stone steps.

'She must have noticed that they are not weathered at all, as if the Seeker who had lived on the island created them just yesterday.'

Wait… when had he come to these conclusions himself?

It just seemed so obvious.

As Sunny froze, feeling very confused, one of the scouting shadows suddenly heard the sound of steel clashing against steel, followed by a pained scream. He didn't feel surprised at all, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

The black crow that had been sitting on his shoulder suddenly dashed into the fog.

'Was that Jet's voice?'

Why did thinking about Jet fill him with a cold sense of dread?

"Sunny?"

Cassie and Nephis had noticed his dazed state.

He lingered for a moment.

"Someone is fighting in the forest, about four kilometers from the top of the stairs. It should be Jet. I'm going."

The words left his mouth as if he had rehearsed them.

Nephis nodded.

"We'll be right…"

Without listening to her response, Sunny dove into the shadows.

'Something is wrong… something is wrong…'

He knew that he was taking a dire risk by rushing blindly into the forest. Wind Flower was too dangerous of a place to behave rashly… Sunny had no idea what enemy he was going to face, was diving into battle without having made any preparations, and did not hold any initiative at all.

But Jet was going to die if he delayed even for a moment. Somehow, he was sure of it.

Stepping out of the shadow deep within the forest, Sunny gritted his teeth and dashed forward.

'It's just one of those situations where I only have bad choices. It's going to be alright, though… I've survived all the previous gambles, so I'll pull through this time, as well!'

But then, he felt a chilling terror grasp his heart.

...Would he really pull through?

Or would he die miserably after finally losing a gamble?

Bursting onto a wide clearing, Sunny slid on the moss and came to halt close to its middle. The smell of blood permeated the air here, both frightening and familiar.

'Where is she, where is she…'

Looking around, he noticed someone laying on the ground, their motionless figure buried in the mist. Dashing there, Sunny fell to his knees and stared down with wide eyes.

Jet… it was Jet. Her black leather armor seemed unbroken, but her beautiful face was contorted in a grimace of terrible agony. The moss was greedily drinking blood that flowed from the terrible wound where her arm had been viciously severed.

'Curse it all!'

Sensing his presence, Jet slowly opened her eyes. Her lips moved

weakly:

"Sunny… be…"

'Behind me, in the fog!'

Before Jet finished her warning, he was already jumping to his feet and spinning around. There was a vague shape moving in the mist. Because of how quickly Sunny had reacted, he had no trouble dodging its strike.

The Sin of Solace hissed, slicing the figure apart.

'That won't do anything.'

Why did he think that?

Right… seemingly woven out of mist, ethereal, elusive. It had to be a wraith of some kind, meaning that physical attacks would be ineffective against it. It seemed that Sunny's subconscious had discerned the insidious nature of the enemy faster than his conscious mind did.

For this battle, he had to discard the jade jian and summon the Cruel Sight instead.

A split second later, the mist wraith seemed to dissipate into the swirling fog. Sunny could not sense its presence at all, which meant that the abomination could attack at any moment, from any direction.

Letting go of the Sin of Solace, he called upon the somber spear. Now… he just had to survive until it was summoned…

'No… I'm missing something…'

Sunny froze in place, torn between the dire need to be absolutely focused and the gnawing feeling that he was forgetting something terribly, terribly important.

'What… what is it?'

He couldn't allow himself to get distracted. A moment of inattention could mean death.

'Focus!'

His other two scouting shadows — gloomy and happy — were going to reach the clearing in a few seconds. Only when his body was augmented by all five shadows would he have the luxury of sparing some thought to the gnawing feeling.

Jet's hoarse voice resounded from below, faltering and weak:

"Sunny… careful… she's…"

He looked down, and then...

Sunny was suddenly inexplicably calm.

His lips moved:

"...She's you."

The Cruel Sight finally manifested itself into existence.

The happy shadow flew into the clearing.

The mist wraith… Undying Slaughter… was already there, waiting for it.

A terrible agony tore Sunny's soul apart.

Falling to his knees, he heard the Spell whispers and thought:

'Your shadow has been destroyed.'

[Your shadow has been destroyed.]

'Your shadow core has been destroyed.'

[Your shadow core has been destroyed.]

'Now, Gloomy…'

Another flash of indescribable torment pierced his existence, throwing Sunny to the ground.

Wreathing in pain, he struggled to stand up.

'I… I knew this would happen. How did I know?'

Finally, he managed to rise to one knee. The mist was suddenly unbearably cold, causing his body to shiver.

Sunny raised his head and saw two icy blue eyes looking down at him.

'I am going to die now.'

The ghostly blade pierced his chest.

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Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around. The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly…

The forest clearing was gone. The bleeding, broken figure of Jet was gone. The corpses of his shadows were gone, too.

…But he remembered it all clearly.

The misty shore, the black cliffs, the cold twilight of the pine forest, the dread of dying on his knees.

'I died.'

But he had not. Otherwise, how would he be standing here, on the deck of the Chain Breaker?

'Neph and Cassie must have saved me, somehow, and retreated back to the ship.'

It was at that moment that he heard Neph's voice:

"I'm fine. I can still put up a fight."

Sunny flinched and stared at her with a deadpan expression.

"What… what did you just say?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"I said I can still fight."

Sunny continued to stare at her silently.

His mind was utterly empty.

'These are the exact words she said when we first landed on the island. No, not just her words. Everything is exactly the same.'

He looked around again, noting every small detail of their surroundings. He was right — it was as if the last hour had never happened.

As if Sunny had returned to the past.

He slowly raised a hand and ran it across his face.

'...What the hell is going on?'

Chapter-1404: Another Round

'It's exactly the same.'

The Chain Breaker was leaning on a broken cliff, the mist swirling around it. Saint was standing motionlessly at the bow of the ship. Nephis had just stated that she would still be able to fight despite exhausting all her essence.

Sunny looked at her, then shifted slightly and threw a glance at Cassie.

'The last time, I noticed her troubled expression and asked if there was something wrong. She explained how her instincts were screaming of danger.'

He hesitated for a few moments and kept silent.

Nephis, however, did not. Noting that Cassie seemed concerned about something, she asked evenly:

"Have you sensed something?"

The blind girl shook her head with a frown.

"Nothing specific. I just have a very ominous feeling. This place, Wind Flower… every part of me is screaming that we are in danger."

Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

The wording had changed a little, but it was almost exactly the same response.

'...How?'

While Nephis and Cassie went about locating the direction where Effie supposedly was with the help of the Guiding Light, he observed

them without saying anything. His mind was strangely split between two extremes — one part of it had turned cold and analytical, driven into a heightened state of utmost vigilance.

The other… the other was shaken and distraught, still reeling from the agony of dying to the ghostly blade. The shock of remembering his harrowing demise was so visceral that Sunny wanted nothing more than to topple to the deck and curl into a shivering ball.

Perhaps he had only managed to remain standing because he was frozen stiff.

"Sunny? Let's go… if you don't mind."

He flinched and glanced at Nephis.

She was already leaping over the railing. Still slow to react, Sunny watched as Cassie awkwardly climbed on top of Nightmare and settled in the saddle. With her small stature, it was not that easy to accomplish.

'...I should adjust the stirrups.'

That ordinary thought finally broke his dazed state. Commanding his Shadows to disembark, he walked over to the edge of the deck and jumped down.

He was the last one to set foot on the white sand of the misty beach.

'I really seem to have traveled to the past. Or is it an illusion? Then again, that vision of death might have been an illusion instead. A vision… did I receive a prophetic vision meant for Cassie, somehow?'

His mind was in turmoil.

…Which was why Sunny flinched and took a step back when a human figure suddenly revealed itself from the fog. He had completely forgotten about the Sin of Solace.

'Right… that bastard scared me the last time, too. Now he's going to glare at me silently.'

The Sin of Solace did, indeed, glared at him silently for a moment.

But then, the apparition smirked and said in a contemptuous tone:

"You know… I am actually starting to enjoy this. Let's go for another round, shall we?"

Sunny looked at him in surprise. Apart from minute changes that had happened because of his inaction, this was the first thing that went differently than how it had in the… in the previous round.

A slight frown appeared on Sunny's face.

'Why is the bastard the only exception to the rule?'

Walking past the apparition, he said quietly:

"Sure. Let's go for another round."

The wraith stared at him in surprise.

As they advanced through the mist, discovered the line of footsteps in the sand, and continued toward the cliffs, Sunny was thinking feverishly.

'Is it an illusion, or have I really traveled in time? If it's the latter… then why? And what do I do now that I have?'

There was too much to think about, and not enough time. His mental state was in shambles, as well. Sunny vaguely realized that he was still in shock, but didn't know what to do about it. He was probably missing a lot of vital things in this rattled condition.

For example…

Suddenly, Sunny felt incredibly cold.

'H—how… how have I not thought about that?!'

They were already ascending the stone steps… which meant that Jet was going to be attacked by Undying Slaughter in a matter of minutes. Seconds?

'Curse it!'

His mind ignited.

Thinking as fast and best as he could, Sunny cursed himself for being such a fool. He wasted almost an entire hour trying to understand why he had been sent into the past instead of considering how to deal with the future!

Even if he was in shock after having his soul torn apart and dying in agony, there was no excuse.

'What do I do now?'

He remembered his naive thoughts bitterly. He would pull through again, somehow? It was just another gamble?

'It seems I have finally become arrogant.'

And paid a heavy price for it. The heaviest price there could be.

'Doesn't matter! There's no time to feel regret, I need to decide what to do now!'

A small, cowardly part of him instantly had an answer. The safest thing to do was to abandon Jet and save himself from having to face Undying Slaughter. He knew that he would die in that clearing… so why go there at all?

But even knowing the danger…

He couldn't let Jet die.

'Go there and fight, then?'

It was not such a foolish thought. The reason why Sunny had lost the last time around was because he had dove into the battle blind and without making any preparations. Now, however, he knew exactly what enemy he would be facing… and although there was very little time left before the clash, he could at least prepare a few things.

'I still don't know enough about Undying Slaughter.'

Fighting her now would be unwise. But he did not really need to… all he had to do was grab Jet and run.

At that point, the shadow he had sent to scout ahead finally heard it. The sound of clashing steel, followed by Soul Reaper's pained scream.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'L—let's… let's do this.'

Chapter-1405: Undone

Dismissing the Sin of Solace, Sunny called upon the Cruel Sight and looked at Nephis. There was no time to explain everything, but he still had to warn them in advance.

What to say? How would he even explain a situation like that?

Not finding any good words, Sunny just said what came to mind:

"I... found Jet. She is being attacked by a powerful enemy — a wraith-like creature capable of dealing damage directly to our souls. I'll try to get Jet and retreat… prepare for battle!"

Before she had time to respond, Sunny already dove into the shadows.

'The reason I died was because I lost the initiative by not knowing the nature of the enemy and not having the correct weapon to deal with a wraith immediately at hand. Most importantly, I failed to realize that my shadows would be vulnerable to Undying Slaughter's attacks, as well.'

He had dodged the first attack of the Defiled without too much trouble. It was unknown which one of them would have lost in the end after the Cruel Sight had manifested itself… in a normal fight. However, Undying Slaughter had moved to destroy his shadows first.

It was no surprise that she had known just how to kill him in one fell swoop… after all, the mist wraith was most likely a Defiled version of Soul Reaper Jet using her future Transformation Ability. Jet knew a lot about his Aspect, and the future Jet would have known even more.

That had been Sunny's undoing.

After a vast part of his soul had been destroyed, he was in no condition to put up any further resistance. So, he died miserably on his knees.

This time was going to be different.

First, he had already summoned the Cruel Sight.

Second, he would protect his shadows

And lastly, he knew a lot about Jet's Aspect, as well.

Stepping out of the shadow, he wrapped it around his body and dashed toward the clearing.

'The Dormant Ability allows her to absorb the essence of living beings she kills. The Awakened Ability allows her to strike directly at the souls of her enemies, bypassing all forms of physical defense. The Ascended Ability allows her to increase the size and capacity of her shattered soul core, as well as removing the limit on how much essence she can use to enhance her body.'

Sunny did not know how ancient Undying Slaughter really was… how distant was the future she had come from. However, her Frankenstein's monster of a soul core would have already reached an enormous size, considering how many people the Six Plagues had slaughtered. She was powerful…

He also did not know much about her Transcendent Ability. It was most likely how Undying Slaughter had attacked him in the form of a wraith, but the details of her Transformation were unclear.

'I should be able to get through this, as long as I'm careful.'

...Or not.

Bursting from the line of trees, Sunny ignited the silver blade of the Cruel Sight with divine flames and dashed toward where Jet was laying on the ground, her blood pouring into the moss.

As he kneeled in front of her, tense and ready to fight, she opened her icy blue eyes and looked at him weakly. Her lips moved.

"Don't speak. I know."

'Now.'

Sunny did not have to kneel and show his back to the enemy. However… if he had the opportunity to fool Undying Slaughter into thinking that she had the upper hand, it would be criminal not to use it.

Sensing an almost imperceptible disturbance in the mist, he shot to his feet and lashed out with the radiant blade of the Cruel Sight. There was a vague figure hidden in the fog, already moving to attack him — caught by surprise, it had no chance to avoid the sudden strike.

…And yet, it did.

'Fast…'

Sunny pulled back his spear and froze, tensely observing the mist. Despite the fact that their roles had reversed, and he was the one to deliver an unexpected attack, the end result was the same. Undying Slaughter had dissipated into the fog, and he was left not knowing where the next blow would come from.

Or he would have, if not for the fact that he knew the future.

'Wrong.'

Sunny knew what would have happened, not what would happen. Him changing the opening exchange of the battle could have changed what Undying Slaughter would do, as well. He still had to be careful.

However, the next few seconds went just as they had before.

The mist wraith did not attack him again, hiding and waiting… until the happy shadow flew from behind the trees and rushed toward its master.

Sunny remembered the harrowing agony of having his soul torn apart and felt his hair stand on end. The mist swirled, and the wraith hiding within it moved to intercept the swift shadow.

'D—damn it…'

Even knowing what was about to come, he couldn't suppress his fear.

Undying Slaughter brought its ghostly blade down… but before it could plunge into the shadow, it was met by another blade.

This one made of pure darkness.

As two ruby flames ignited in the depths of his shadow, Saint deflected the wraith's blow and stepped into the clearing.

"Blade of Darkness" Ability Description: [The true darkness dwelling in this Shadow's heart can be summoned in the form of a fearsome weapon, as long as the Shadow has mastered the use of that weapon. The Blade of Darkness can slay those of flesh and those of spirit; it never dulls, never falters, and never breaks. Alternatively, the darkness can be summoned to augment a mundane weapon.]

Saint's dark sword could cut both tangible and intangible enemies, just like the Cruel Sight could. More than that, she was immune to soul damage… which made his taciturn Shadow an almost perfect adversary for the hateful mist wraith.

Even if Undying Slaughter was a Defiled Transcendent like the Mad Prince was, Saint was a Transcendent Devil. Their power… at least theoretically… was on par.

Or so Sunny hoped.

Faced with the dark blade, the mist wraith glided back. The next moment, a second shadow appeared in the clearing. Fiend jumped out of it, infernal flames burning in his eyes.

The happy shadow wrapped itself around the graceful stone knight, while the gloomy one wrapped itself around the steel ogre. Sunny himself was augmented by the other three.

Undying Slaughter was caught in the middle of a triangle formed by Saint, Fiend, and Sunny.

'Let's see who will die now.'

Forcing himself to grin, Sunny gripped the Cruel Sight tighter and dashed forward.

Chapter-1406: Undying

...Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around. The Chain Breaker was laying on white sand, tilted awkwardly.

'Damnation!'

His trembling fist collided with the railing and splintered the enchanted wood. He didn't feel the pain.

'Curse it! Curse it all!'

"Sunny? Are you alright?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, took a labored breath, then looked himself over and slowly turned to Nephis.

His voice sounded hoarse:

"...Yes. It seems that I am."

In the end… he still lost to Undying Slaughter.

The odds seemed to be in his favor. He successfully avoided having his shadows destroyed, summoned Saint and Fiend, and managed to wrestle the initiative from the ghostly claws of the mist wraith.

However, the battle did not go how he had hoped it would. It ended in disaster, just like the previous time.

Sunny had been almost certain that Saint would be immune to Undying Slaughter's soul attacks. And it turned out to be true… somewhat. It seemed that she could withstand much more damage than the rest of them, but even then, the ghostly blade was just as lethal to the taciturn knight as it was to Sunny and Fiend.

The reason, as he belatedly realized, was the unique nature of Jet's Aspect. Her attacks bypassed physical defenses and struck the soul… and yet, they were not true soul attacks. Instead, they were physical attacks that inexplicably dealt damage to the soul.

How was one supposed to defend against that?

The mightier one's soul was, the more it took to destroy it. Other than enduring the damage or avoiding being hit entirely, there was no other way… at least none that he knew of.

Sadly, it was easier said than done. Saint's sword and the Cruel Sight were capable of blocking the ghostly blade of Undying Slaughter, but actually withstanding her dreadful assault was almost impossible. The mist wraith was astonishingly swift, devastatingly strong, and insidiously cunning on top of that.

She was a truly abominable creature... and an inexplicable one, too. Sunny had just enough time to catch a glimpse of what hid in the darkness of her defiled soul, and what he saw left him reeling.

Undying Slaughter could be called a Corrupted Beast, since there was only one node of vile darkness infesting her soul. But that node… was truly colossal in size, dwarfing any other corruption core he had even seen before. So, her actual power could very well be equal to a Terror or a Titan.

Still… faced with Saint's resilient soul and two weapons that could both block and damage intangible beings, Undying Slaughter was at least forced to change tactics. After clashing with them a few times, the mist wraith silently discarded her ghostly form, turning back into a corporeal creature.

If Sunny had ever had any doubt that the Six Plagues were the future version of the members of the cohort, they were instantly dispelled at that moment. Undying Slaughter looked more like a revenant, both dreadful and dreadfully beautiful, than a human being… but there was no way he could fail to recognize those icy blue eyes, that chilling presence, and the ruthless way in which she fought.

She was truly Soul Reaper Jet… or rather, had been once.

Undying Slaughter might have been Jet once, but there was nothing human left in her merciless, mad eyes anymore.

Once she assumed a corporeal form, Sunny was thrown into despair.

His plan to stall the abomination while Fiend retreated with the real Jet was shattered almost instantly. Undying Slaughter read his intentions like an open book, and not only made following the plan impossible, but also cruelly turned it against Sunny.

The initiative he had so arduously won was immediately lost when the revenant aimed all her attacks at Jet instead of him, Saint, or Fiend. Forced to protect the gravely wounded companion, they had no choice but to follow her cadence and fall under her control.

It was a simple, but viciously effective strategy.

Considering how skilled, explosively fast, and terrifyingly strong Undying Slaughter was, the rest of the battle did not take long.

…Fiend's carapace of black silver, which Sunny considered nearly indestructible, was eventually pierced and violently split open, the infernal flames spilling out of horrid wounds like blood. The ravenous ogre collapsed with a frightened, confused howl and grew still.

Saint's stone armor was shattered, her limbs were broken. Ruby dust flowed like a river, and although the taciturn knight tried to stand her ground, the ghostly blade eventually found its way into the narrow crack of her visor. The crimson glow of her ruby eyes was extinguished, and Saint crumbled to the ground, lifeless.

The Spell announced her death mournfully.

Sunny thought that he would be next… but Undying Slaughter was not that kind.

She made him watch Jet die before delivering the fatal blow.

Back on the deck of the Chain Breaker, he closed his eyes.

'How... how can anyone fight that thing?'

"I'm fine. I can still put up a fight."

Sunny flinched and looked up.

Nephis must have mistaken the reason for his grim expression and repeated her usual words… it was just a coincidence.

Suddenly, he felt a strange sense of incongruity. Mere seconds ago, Sunny had been fighting for his life, watching his Shadows die in fear and sorrow. He had watched Jet die, as well.

He had even died himself… again.

And yet, Nephis and Cassie were behaving as if nothing had happened.

Well… it had not, for them.

Sunny understood that, but he still couldn't help but feel ashamed, angry, and resentful.

He lingered for a few moments, and then forced out a smile.

"...Yeah. I can still put up a fight, too."

His smile widened slightly, growing both darker and more sincere.

It was true.

Sunny might have lost to Undying Slaughter again, but he acquired something extremely valuable from that loss.

Looking around, he took in the sight of the swirling mist, white sand, and the black cliffs.

'So I'm back again…'

What he received was truly precious.

It was the knowledge that his strange return to the past was not a one-time thing.

Which meant that he was not done fighting.

Chapter-1407: Moving in a Circle

Giving him a nod, Nephis went about asking Cassie to use the Guiding Light to locate Effie. Sunny, meanwhile, remained motionless. He was somewhat lost in thought.

'First of all… stay calm.'

His behavior up until now had been nothing short of embarrassing. Of course, there were extenuating circumstances. During his first… round?... Sunny had been barely conscious of the fact that time was repeating itself. During the second try, he was still reeling and in shock from dying gruesomely at the hands of Undying Slaughter.

But this was his third attempt — this time, he had to maintain his composure and not lose control.

'...No, not quite right.'

Who was to say that this attempt was his third? It was only the third attempt since he had become aware of the fact that everything was repeating itself. There was no telling how many times he had died before that.

Still deep in thought, Sunny glanced at Nephis and Cassie. He remained motionless for a few moments, then silently walked over to Nightmare and adjusted the stirrups of the Overpriced Saddle to make it easier for the blind girl to mount.

Soon, they abandoned the ship and stepped on the white sand of the misty beach. Sunny walked in the back, looking down with a somber expression on his face. He did not react in any way when the Sin of Solace suddenly appeared from the fog.

The sword wraith stared at him mockingly.

"Calling the Shadows? Shame the only thing you achieved was getting them killed… like you get everyone else who follows you killed. Hey, here's an idea! How about you ask Nephis and Cassia for help next?"

Sunny spared him a grim look, causing the Sin of Solace to cover his mouth with a hand theatrically.

"Ah. I've said a bit too much, haven't I?"

Sunny looked away.

'It is as I thought.'

It seemed that the sword wraith had become aware of the fact that time was repeating itself long before Sunny. What was it that the Sin of Solace had said the last time?

'I am actually starting to enjoy this. Let's go for another round, shall we?'

Back then, Sunny had only paid attention to the fact that the wraith was behaving differently from the past, unlike everyone else. But now, it was clear that the apparition had already known about the twisted nature of time on Wind Flower.

Come to think of it…

Had it not been the inconsistency of how the Sin of Solace behaved that first alerted Sunny to the anomaly? The wraith had stared at Sunny silently, and he turned to ask if the bastard was not going to say anything. The odd feeling that eventually allowed him to realize the truth started gnawing at him after that.

'The time… is repeating itself…'

Sunny looked into the fog.

A few moments later, he sighed deeply.

'...I'm such a fool.'

The Great River was a river of time. Wind Flower was surrounded by a mystical whirlpool… and what did whirlpools do? They spun. The water caught in them revolved in a circle.

So, the time here must have revolved in a circle, too. Forming a loop.

It was an outlandish theory, but not an entirely baseless one.

In fact, it could explain a few things. Why the ancient stone steps did not look weathered at all, for example. How Effie and Jet could have survived an entire year on this island despite their Flaws…

'...Wait.'

If Effie and Jet were caught in a loop of repeating time here on Wind Flower… then was Undying Slaughter caught in it, too? She had not shown any signs of knowing what Sunny would do in advance. Which meant that she did not know about the loop — and therefore, had no means of escaping it.

How had one of the dreaded Six Plagues ended up being trapped here?

More importantly, why was Sunny the only one who seemed to be aware of the loop?

He frowned. After a few moments, his eyes widened slightly.

'It's not me. It's… it's the Sin of Solace.'

The sword wraith seemed to have been aware of the loop from the very beginning. He was somehow immune to forgetting the events of every previous revolution… was it because the cursed sword was innately tied to truth and revelations, which it was supposed to grant its mad wielder?

Sunny was not particularly mad, but the Sin of Solace was a part of his mind… a splintered and twisted one, but a part nevertheless. Was it possible that he had slowly become contaminated by the knowledge the sword wraith possessed, somehow? Or that the

awareness of the loop was one of the revelations of madness granted to him by the cursed sword?

Sunny did not know the exact reason, but he was certain that it was because of the Sin of Solace that he had become aware of the circular nature of time on Wind Flower.

His thoughts turned somber.

'The "how" and "why" are clear. Now what?'

Undying Slaughter was far more fearsome than Sunny had expected. He had lost to her bitterly…

Which was not to say that he could not win.

If Sunny entered the battle with Nephis, Nightmare, Cassie, and her Echoes… if he prepared better…

He would still probably lose and watch everyone die. For the first few times, at least… few dozen times? Few hundred times?

If the loop was infinite, it did not matter. Sooner or later, he would learn enough and find a way to kill Undying Slaughter.

But was the loop really infinite?

And even if it was, what would killing Undying Slaughter even achieve?

She would come back to life as soon as the next revolution started, just like Sunny had been coming back to life.

His face suddenly paled.

'Is it all… meaningless?'

Fighting Undying Slaughter, saving Jet, searching for Effie… it was indeed meaningless if he did not know a way to escape the loop.

But was it even possible to escape it?

'It has to be.'

The Serpent King had come to Wind Flower and returned, after all. There was a way, so Sunny just had to find it.

First and foremost, he needed information. How did the loop function? What were its boundaries? When did time terminate and turn back? And much, much more.

'I need to learn all kinds of stuff.'

The future… promised to be rather interesting.

And incredibly tiring.

Sunny shuddered, imagining how many more times he was going to die.

Chapter-1408: Closest Path

By the time the three of them reached the line of footsteps in the sand, Sunny had formulated a rough plan of what he had to do during this particular revolution.

Well… it wasn't much of a plan. There were too many paths he could take, so he simply chose one that was the closest. Jet was not that far, and had to know more about what was happening on the island than he did. So, Sunny was determined to find her before Undying Slaughter did.

He was not enthused about the idea of fighting the dreadful wraith again so soon. Luckily, there was a high possibility that he could snatch Jet and escape without exchanging a single blow with the Defiled.

'What I need right now is not strength, but speed.'

Sunny glanced at Nephis and Cassie.

He would have to share his knowledge with his companions sooner or later, without a doubt. Just imagining that conversation made him uncomfortable, though.

It was a rather bizarre thing to say to someone, that they had been living the same hour over and over again without ever realizing it.

'I'll tell them the next time… hopefully, there will be a next time.'

Sunny suspected that the loop was endless — it should have existed for as long as the colossal whirlpool existed, which had already been hundreds of years — but he couldn't be sure. So, for now, he had to treat each revolution as if it was the last one.

'I'll tell them after I'm back, then.'

Sadly, he had already wasted a lot of time coming to this realization, so there was none of it left for lengthy explanations.

Noticing his intense gaze, Nephis looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, considering his words carefully, then opened his mouth and said just three of them:

"Aster, Song, Vale."

Her expression changed slightly, becoming darker and more intense. It was not exactly the same murderous reaction as she had showed on the Ashen Barrow, but Sunny still felt a little uncomfortable.

Nephis frowned.

"Why…"

She paused for a moment, then took a deep breath.

"Are we under a mind hex again?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. But… something similar. Right now, I need you two to not ask questions and do what I tell you. Can you do that?"

Cassie had turned around in the saddle, a troubled expression appearing on her face. She remained silent, though, waiting for Nephis to speak.

Neph stared at him for a few long moments, then nodded slowly.

"Alright."

Sunny sighed with relief. He knew that she trusted him… but blindly trusting someone was not easy. It was even harder to suppress one's curiosity.

Personally, he would have had a lot of trouble both with the former and the latter.

He forced out a smile.

"Good. Then return to the ship and hide. Stay safe until I return."

Sunny had no idea if returning to the Chain Breaker was indeed safe… but it was the best temporary solution he could come up with.

Turning to Cassie, he added:

"I'll need Nightmare."

The blind girl swiftly dismounted, allowing him to hop into the saddle. Looking down, Sunny lingered for a moment, then commanded Saint and Fiend to protect his companions.

A moment later, he was galloping through the fog.

He wanted to avoid fighting Undying Slaughter, which meant that he would not need his combat Shadows. If he still ended up facing the mist wraith, summoning them to him would take only a couple of moments.

'Faster!'

Nightmare, however, was the fastest of his followers… his speed was far superior to even Sunny's own, as well as that of his shadows. To find Jet and bring her away from the misty forest unscathed, Sunny would need his steed the most.

He sent all five shadows to augment the dark destrier.

The two of them flew along the line of lonesome footprints, swiftly approaching the wall of black cliffs. The black stallion scaled the stone steps without ever slowing down, his adamantine hooves sending sparks flying from the black rock, the melodious staccato traveling through the mist like the rumble of war drums.

Soon, they entered the forest.

Sunny was way ahead of the previous revolution… Jet should not have entered the clearing yet, so she could be anywhere. That was a problem, considering that he did not dare send his shadows to scout

anymore.

'Quite a predicament…'

He could use the Silver Bell to point Jet in his direction… the problem was that Undying Slaughter would recognize its ringing as well. Not to mention that there were most likely other deadly creatures on the island.

It was a shame that the Guiding Light pointed to Effie, but not Jet. Otherwise, Sunny would have taken it with him.

Nightmare reached the clearing where Sunny had died the last two times — or however many times it really was — and crossed it in the blink of an eye.

'She shouldn't have come from the direction of the beach, so the most logical choice is to continue toward the tower.'

The fog veiled everything, making the world appear only a couple dozen meters wide.

'Damn it!'

He could stumble on Jet at any moment… however, he could also stumble on Undying Slaughter at any moment.

Sunny was hesitating to send his shadow in all directions, after all, when he suddenly smelled it.

The stench of blood.

Following his mental command, Nightmare slowed down, and then came to a halt. Sunny looked around, inhaling the wisps of mist, then sent his steed toward a particular tree.

The ancient pine reached further than he could see, but there, on its bark, was a spot much darker than the rest of it. A bloody handprint, as if someone wounded had leaned on the tree trunk.

He spun in the saddle and finally noticed another bloody print.

That gave him a direction to follow.

…Coincidentally, that direction led back toward the now-distant clearing.

Sending Nightmare into a gallop, Sunny feverishly took in his surroundings. Despite the fact that the trunks of the tall pines were flying past him with terrible speed, he still managed to notice the marks. Sometimes, there were bloody handprints on the trees. Sometimes, there were drops of blood on the ground.

Sunny guided his steed to follow the bloody trail.

And then, finally…

A human figure appeared from the fog, leaning heavily on a tree. She was hunched and pale as a ghost, but her glaive was raised, ready to attack.

He heard a hoarse whisper:

"Come get me, wench…"

It was Jet.

A moment later, the image of an infernal black stallion appearing from the mist reflected in the icy depths of her piercing blue eyes, with a rider in a flying black mantle leaning low in the saddle.

Her pupils widened in astonishment.

"S—Sunny?"

Extending a hand in Jet's direction, he shouted:

"No time to explain!"

Her hesitation lasted only for a split second.

Dropping the glaive to the ground, Jet reached out with her own bloodied hand. Grabbing it, Sunny pulled. A moment later, Soul Reaper was sitting right behind him, clutching onto the folds of

Ananke's Mantle.

The glaive disappeared into a rain of sparks.

Sunny commanded Nightmare to get the hell out of the misty forest as soon as possible. As the Shadow carried the two Masters away, Jet leaned forward and asked in a pained voice:

"I'm... not complaining... but... how the hell are you here?"

He grinned.

'What a complicated question.'

"How else? I came on a ship!"

Chapter-1409: Covering the Tracks

Sunny did not guide Nightmare directly back to the Chain Breaker. He had managed to follow Jet's bloody trail, after all, so Undying Slaughter would most likely be able to, as well. Since Sunny did not want to lead her to Nephis and Cassie, he had to cover their tracks first.

The problem was, he didn't really know how to do it. Tracking was one of the basic skills taught during the Wilderness Survival course, which obviously covered covering the tracks as well. But... he needed to know the capabilities of the enemy to know how to hide from them, and Undying Slaughter was still largely a mystery.

Remembering the line of footprints leading to the edge of the island, Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then turned his steed to the left. They were still moving in the general direction of the cliffs, but to a point far removed from the stone steps.

With winds whistling in his ears, Sunny raised his voice slightly:

"Where's Effie?"

There was a lot he had to ask and tell Jet, but this question was the most important. He both dreaded and couldn't wait to hear the answer.

She remained silent for a moment, probably wondering how he knew that the two of them had been together, then said in a stifled tone:

"...I'm not sure. We were separated in the vortex."

Sunny's expression fell. He gritted his teeth, then forced himself to calm down.

'It's alright.'

It was better than alright, really. Judging from Jet's words, Effie was most likely still alive. The loop had even conveniently solved the dire problem of her Flaw. Here on Wind Flower, she would never starve to death.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

'...Can this be why Undying Slaughter is here, too?'

The mist wraith possessed the same Flaw as Jet, which meant that she had to kill in order to survive. That might have been fine back when the forces of the Defilement were besieging the cities of the sybils. But now that these cities were gone, what was there for Undying Slaughter to… slaughter?

"Sunny, I need to warn you. I'm being pursued by…"

Jet's voice was pained and hoarse. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"I know. Let's talk later… for now, hold on tight."

Just then, Nightmare reached the border of the forest. Escaping the line of tall trees, the black stallion rushed across the narrow strip of empty land between the forest and the edge of the cliffs. His hooves left a line of prints in the soft moss.

Reaching the very edge, the dark destrier did not slow down at all. Instead, he accelerated even more… and leapt forward, soaring high into the air above the hidden chasm of the dark abyss.

Jet let out a stunned yelp.

Dismissing the Shadow, Sunny spun, grabbed onto her, and summoned the Dark Wing. Before the momentum of Nightmare's leap fully dissipated, the translucent cloak manifested on his back and turned into a blur. The two of them glided down slowly, moving along the surface of the weathered black rock.

Sunny felt his arm, which supported Jet's back, become soaked in blood. His expression darkened. He had not noticed before, but there

were more wounds on her body than he thought.

Soul Reaper grimaced, enduring the pain, and then said with a bit of dark amusement:

"You… really know how to make a girl squeal, don't you, Sunny?"

He froze for a moment, mortified. A terrible despair grasped his heart with icy claws.

'No, no… it can't be!'

He knew this feeling.

Had Jet… spent too much time with Effie?

Had she been corrupted by that vulgar, foulmouthed lecher?!

'Damn it all!'

Uttering a quiet curse, he adjusted the direction of their flight and answered through gritted teeth:

"I... guess."

Despite her pained expression, Soul Reaper let out a laugh.

They were rather far away from the misty beach, so it took a while to glide back to it. Sunny had to approach the cliffs and push them up a few times, afraid that they'll fall beneath the island. However, the wall of black rock gave away eventually, and they entered the familiar bay.

Landing on the white sand, Sunny put Jet down and supported her. His gaze was a bit worried.

"Can you walk?"

She nodded.

"It's alright. That thing didn't get me too bad. So, I'll... live."

Jet grinned.

She was not going to bleed to death, anyway… in the worst case, she would just revert to a more corpse-like state. Sunny studied her for a few moments, then nodded.

"Let's go, then. Our ship is not far from here."

They walked into the fog.

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Soon after, they were in the main cargo hold of the Chain Breaker. The air here smelled of blood, but Jet looked much better — even though Nephis had not recovered enough essence to use her healing powers yet, both she and Cassie possessed Memories capable of treating small wounds.

It was one of the benefits of belonging to a great clan.

Jet had dismissed the upper part of her armor and was sitting on a crate, her torso wrapped in bandages. There was a generous amount of food on another crate in front of her, as well as fruit juice and freshly brewed tea. She was devouring the improvised meal voraciously.

Crow Crow was sitting on her shoulder, seemingly enraptured and glued to his master. From time to time, Jet absentmindedly fed it a piece of fruit.

Nothing had found and attacked the beached ship yet, but Sunny was still tense. At the same time… he felt incredibly relieved. It was so reassuring to have Jet here with him, alive and relatively unscathed.

Nephis and Cassie seemed elated, too, even if they weren't as close with the infamous government Master. Their group of three had become a group of four.

'Good…'

Another great thing about bringing Jet back was that Sunny was going to have an easier time explaining things to everyone.

When she seemed to have satiated her hunger, somewhat, he leaned

forward and said:

"Alright. Now, I'll try to explain a few things."

Chapter-1410: River Nomads

The three women looked at him expectedly.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"You know where we are, right, Jet? In general, I mean."

Taking the cup of tea and cradling it in her hands, she nodded.

"Yeah… we are inside that weird pyramid. Somehow. This place is the Great River, which is supposed to flow endlessly from the future into the past."

He sighed in relief. It seemed that Effie and Jet had learned a few things about the nature of the Third Nightmare, as well.

"Indeed. Because of the nature of the Great River, there are all kinds of strange things happening to time in this Nightmare. For example… Nephis and I have been here for about four months now. But Cassie has been here for more than a year."

Nephis and Cassie nodded calmly, since they had already known that fact. Jet, however, seemed perplexed.

"What?"

Sunny looked at her, lingered for a moment, and said:

"Yeah. What about you?"

Soul Reaper suddenly seemed uncertain. She touched her hair briefly, then blinked a couple times.

"About… two months? Effie and I were sent to the same place, two months ago."

This time, it was Neph's and Cassie's turn to look stunned.

"How can that be?"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"I'll explain in a bit. But first, Jet… can you tell us what has happened to you two?"

She took a sip of tea, then smiled back at him.

"Sure. Why not?"

Jet's icy blue eye grew a little distant.

"The three of you must know more about this place than we do. Look, you even have a ship! Effie and I… we weren't that lucky. The people whose roles we've taken belonged to a tribe of river nomads. Their ancestors were the survivors of one of the destroyed cities, I think, but these guys… they had already regressed into abject savagery. Which is not that surprising, really, considering how they lived."

She sighed.

"The river nomads did not have a place to live, constantly migrating instead. They rode sea creatures as steeds and hunted weaker abominations for sustenance. When Defiled or powerful Nightmare Creatures appeared, they ran. Actually, their way of life was really ingenious… and tenacious.

I have never even thought that it was possible, for humans to live entirely in the water without ever stepping foot on land."

Cassie tilted her head a little, confused.

"These nomads… they were Riverborn?"

Sunny was confused, too. How could Riverborn lead nomadic lives? Weren't they bound to a span of the Great River they were born on?

Jet nodded somberly.

"Yeah. That was why they regressed that much, that quickly. The nomads lived very short lives, you see. No generation lasted more than a couple of decades. They rarely remained as children for more than a year or two, and were expected to join the hunts immediately after. If there was danger, the older generation was sacrificed to let the younger one escape.

Even if there was no danger, they had to follow the abominations they could hunt. So…"

She shook her head.

"They might have looked like adults, but in reality, it was a tribe where no one ever reached adulthood. They were all ignorant, savage kids."

Soul Reaper leaned back, fed her crow Echo a grape, and grimaced.

"Well, by the time Effie and I came around, it could barely be called a tribe. There were maybe a dozen people left. All the other nomad tribes seemed to have gone extinct already, as well. We were most likely the last."

Her expression darkened slightly.

"So, we tried to keep them alive and find out where we were, what was happening, and how to conquer the Nightmare. It took us some time to learn how to live the lives of the Great River nomads. In the process, we also learned from the surviving tribesmen about the Tomb of Ariel, the Great River, the Defilement, and the fall of the River Cities. Oh… and we fought plenty of Nightmare Creatures.

Well, I did, at least."

Jet stretched and then winced, briefly touching one of her bandages.

"Everything went if not well, then at least alright until we stumbled on an especially powerful swarm of the Drowned. Our tribe… at that point, there were no children among the nomads anymore, so there was not even a point in trying to run. In the battle, everyone was killed. Only Effie and I managed to escape."

Sunny noted that Jet and Effie remained Outsiders despite having taken the roles of two Riverborn people. It was an interesting fact.

Meanwhile, she shrugged and continued:

"Usually, our mounts would have been fast enough to give a slip to most enemies, but the Drowned pursued us relentlessly, as if it was their life's mission to obliterate all nomads. The sea creatures we rode had also been wounded in the battle, so they were gradually slowing down.

After about a week of running away and fighting pitched battles with those bastards, we got lost in the mist, and then sucked into this whirlpool. I only managed to send my Echo out, hoping against all hope that Crow Crow would manage to find one of you."

Soul Reaper looked at the black bird and smiled. Then, her smile faded slowly.

"Effie and I were separated while trying to reach the island. And here we are, I guess."

Nephis glanced at Cassie, then frowned a little.

"What do you mean? How long have you been here?"

Jet looked at her with surprise.

'There, the moment of truth.'

She scratched her head.

"A couple hours? I landed, tried to search for Effie, and got lost in the mist. Then, that thing attacked me… I managed to flee, but she would have probably finished me off soon if not for Sunny. Talk about a prince on a white horse... who needs one when there's a pauper on a black horse, right?"

Soul Reaper grinned and downed the rest of her tea in one gulp. A satisfied expression appeared on her face.

Nephis and Cassie, meanwhile, seemed troubled. The blind girl

frowned:

"But how is it possible? Your Echo arrived at Fallen Grace many months ago."

Jet stared at her, bewildered.

"What? Wait… I thought that you guys were already on the island. Wasn't that why Crow Crow was able to find Sunny so fast?

Cassie shook her head.

"No… we only ventured to find Wind Flower after learning that the two of you were here."

Soul Reaper leaned back.

"That doesn't make any sense."

Everyone grew quiet, failing to understand the strange discrepancy.

In that silence, Sunny finally spoke:

"It's because time moves in a circle on this island."

Chapter-1411: Monster Preserve

Nephis, Cassie, and Jet stared at him incredulously. Pierced by three intense gazes, each belonging to a beautiful woman, Sunny shifted uncomfortably and pulled on the collar of the Shroud of Dusk.

'I, uh… I think I really need to start socializing with guys more… why am I always surrounded by lethal beauties?'

Eventually, Nephis repeated his words evenly:

"Moves in a circle?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. I only became aware of it a few hours ago… or a few revolutions ago, to be precise. Think about it — the waters of the Great River represent time, and we are surrounded by an enormous whirlpool. So…"

He pointed to Jet.

"You only remember being on Wind Flower for a couple of hours, but in fact, you've been here for almost a year. The time you spent in the Nightmare is the same as Cassie."

Looking at their tense expressions, Sunny sighed.

"Well, in fact, what I said earlier is not entirely accurate. It seems that Nephis and I entered the Nightmare four months ago, while you and Cassie entered it more than a year ago. But there is no telling how many times the time repeated itself before I became aware of the loop, so… although I don't think that it's the case, we might very well have been stuck on this island for a hundred years.

There's no way to tell unless we leave."

Everyone remained silent for a while. When the pause grew too long, Cassie finally asked in a hesitant tone:

"These previous… revolutions… do you mean that we have already explored the island several times, but you are the only one who remembers it?"

Sunny's face grew dark. He looked away, grimaced, and then said somberly:

"Explored the island? Not really. We barely left the beach when Undying Slaughter attacked Jet in the forest… each time, I went ahead to try and stop her, and each time, I died miserably. Jet, too."

Soul Reaper threw a sharp glance at him and paled a little. It was not a pleasant thing to hear that you had been killed. The corners of her mouth twisted into a dark smile.

"...How regrettable."

He sighed.

"This is the first time I managed to live past an hour. So, I don't really know much about the loop yet. I'm sure it doesn't terminate each time I die, which means that Nephis and Cassie must have lived longer. You might have even survived long enough to reach the termination point — but since your memories are erased between revolutions, it's impossible to tell."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Why are you the only one who remembers?"

Sunny pointed to the Sin of Solace — the sword, not the wraith — which lay on a crate nearby.

"I suspect it has something to do with this cursed sword of mine. Its… spirit… was actually the first one to show signs of knowing about the loop."

She seemed to accept the explanation after thinking about it for a few moments.

Jet sighed and leaned forward to pour herself more tea. Cassie gripped the Guiding Light tighter, lost in thought.

After a minute passed in silence, Nephis looked at Sunny and asked:

"What is Undying Slaughter like?"

His expression froze. Struggling to suppress an involuntary shiver, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then said evenly:

"...She's a horror."

He grimaced, and then described his encounters with the Defiled monstrosity in as much detail as he could. As he did, the faces of his companions grew more and more somber. Eventually, Nephis briefly glanced at Jet, and then looked away.

"Formidable. If we attack together, what do you think our chances will be?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"At least some of us will die… all of us, most likely. Especially with how low on essence you are."

She sighed.

"...Then we avoid battle, for now."

He blinked.

"For now?"

Nephis looked at him and shrugged calmly.

"We'll have to face the Six Plagues eventually. Now, however, is not the right time."

Sunny was a little bit aggrieved.

'Did she not hear how absolutely terrifying that thing is?'

But then again… it was Nephis he was talking about. Actually, it was

already incredible that she had not suggested attacking Undying Slaughter right away, saying something like "it's just a Defiled version of one of the most deadly Masters in the world, but long past reaching Sainthood".

That was personal growth right there!

Cassie slowly shook her head.

"We might avoid fighting Undying Slaughter, but I don't think we can avoid battle."

Jet looked at her curiously.

"What do you mean?"

The blind girl hesitated for a moment.

"If it's like Sunny said, then I finally understand why this place feels so dangerous. Think about it… previously, we only knew that no one returns from Wind Flower. Human ships, the Defiled, Nightmare Creatures — very few things that enter the whirlpool can ever escape. I assumed that all these beings had perished here, somehow. But if some of them are trapped in this time loop just like us…"

Her face paled a little.

"...Then this island is teeming with all kinds of abominations that have been caught, but managed to reach the island instead of being swallowed by the vortex. How many of them must have accumulated here over the centuries? How many horrors are hiding in the mist?"

Cassie shook her head.

"If the time loop really exists, then Wind Flower… it's like a monster preserve."

And uneasy silence settled in the cargo bay. Everyone's expressions grew ugly.

'A monster preserve…'

Sunny looked resentfully into the distance. She was right… considering the pulling force of the vortex, all kinds of abominable creatures must have been caught by the whirlpool over the centuries. Most of them had perished in its depths, but plenty would have managed to reach the island. And since time here was stagnant, moving in a circle… all of them were still here, good as new.

A chill crept up his spine.

This place… just what kind of hell was it?

Nephis, meanwhile, rose and put her hand on the hilt of her sword. Her usually impassive face was somber, but determined.

"Be that as it may… our goal still remains the same."

The rest of them looked at her silently. She frowned.

"Our goal was to find Effie and Soul Reaper Jet, then return to Fallen Grace. We are still missing Effie, so… no matter if there is a time anomaly or not, nothing really changed. We have no choice but to venture out, find her, and escape."

Sunny gave her a grim look.

"There is one problem, though. Who is going to fuel the Chain Breaker with essence? Yours is already consumed, and it won't be sufficiently replenished any time soon."

Nephis shrugged.

"You can do it, as long as we time our escape and leave at dusk. Or dawn."

He sighed, then stood up and nodded.

"Alright, then. I agree… the longer we wait, the higher the chances are that Effie will meet fatal danger. Let's make a detour to avoid Undying Slaughter and follow the Guiding Light deeper inland."

Jet winced, but stood up, too. Her bandages were painted red by blood.

"Count me in."

Finally, only Cassie was left sitting.

She glanced at the sacred staff in her hand, then rose and took a deep breath.

"...No time to waste, then."

After spending a little time to discuss their strategy and prepare, the group left the Chain Breaker and stepped on the white sand once again.

Chapter-1412: Misty Forest

Sunny had managed to survive longer than an hour. He had avoided clashing with Undying Slaughter, and even rescued Jet…

And yet, he was not very reassured.

As the cohort left the Chain Breaker behind and ventured into the swirling mist once again, he was not confident that they would survive at all. In fact, he dreaded Wind Flower even more.

"How many times do you think you can die before sanity abandons you completely?"

The Sin of Solace, who was walking alongside him, was not helping at all.

The sword wraith laughed.

"Considering how thick your skull is… I'd wager a few dozen times more. Yes, after that, you'll probably turn into a drooling fool. Gods. I wonder if I'll still be stuck with you after you've become a vegetable…"

Trying to ignore the infuriating apparition, Sunny kept his eyes on the fog.

'In your dreams.'

He only had to take one look at Nightmare to know that a few dozen deaths would not break him. The Sin of Solace was simply gloating.

A few years of torturous deaths, though…

'We need to escape this horrible place as soon as possible.'

The cohort was advancing up the beach in a similar formation to the

previous revolutions, but now, Jet was walking behind Sunny and Nephis. Cassie had summoned her Echoes, as well, who were now moving in front of Nightmare.

Together, they represented a formidable battle force… and yet, Sunny did not know if their power was enough to survive the suffocating fog of Wind Flower.

'I'm starting to understand why there are so few Saints around…'

This time, they chose a direction opposite of where the stone steps — and Undying Slaughter — were. Instead of moving directly toward the cliffs, they followed along the edge of the island, eventually reaching the border of the bay.

There, they ascended the wall of black rock and reached the plateau above. Sunny used Shadow Step to arrive there first and guarded the landing until the other members of the cohort climbed up. By the time everyone did, the second hour since their arrival on Wind Flower should have been well over.

Above the cliffs, it was the same landscape. A forest of tall pine trees stretched in front of them, white fog swirling between the ancient trunks. Being in the mist had felt suffocating from the very start… but now that Sunny knew that a dreadful wraith could be hiding in it, the feeling grew ten times worse.

The Echo of the sybil glided forward, the hem of her red dress hovering just above the moss. The rest of them followed.

They followed the soft radiance of the Guiding Light into the murky depths of the forest. The fog swallowed everything behind, muffling the sounds and flowing slowly between the ancient trees. A few minutes passed in tense silence, then a few more.

It was hard to keep track of time in this misty limbo, but eventually, Sunny judged that another hour had passed. At that time, Nephis raised a hand and said:

"Stop."

She seemed to have recovered from essence exhaustion — enough so,

at least, to regain access to her Dormant Ability. Now that she had, Jet could finally be healed.

Sunny and Cassie watched the fog as Nephis placed her hands on Soul Reaper's back. They shone with soft white light, and soon, Jet's face cleared. She took a deep breath and smiled in satisfaction.

At the same time, Neph's eyes grew a little cloudy. She sighed softly and took a step back. If Sunny did not know better, he would not have suspected that she was enduring harrowing pain.

"Let's continue."

They were about to move again when Cassie suddenly turned her head. The blind girl remained motionless for a moment, then jumped down from Nightmare's back.

"Something is approaching! Get ready!"

'Curses!'

Sunny snarled, holding the Sin of Solace in one hand and the Cruel Sight — in its short sword form — in another. Nephis swiftly drew her longsword and dismissed its scabbard. Jet raised her glaive into a high stance.

Saint, Fiend, Nightmare, and the two Echoes moved to surround the humans in a protective circle. The Quiet Dancer floated up and hovered above Cassie's shoulder, its tip pointing into the depths of the forest.

Everything grew still for a moment.

Sunny stared into the swirling mist, not knowing where the attack would come from. He couldn't see anything… couldn't hear anything. Even his shadow sense was suppressed.

"Above us!"

'Damna…'

Before he could finish the thought, something massive fell on them

from above.

'...tion!'

It was a huge, grotesque Nightmare Creature that resembled a carcass of an enormous black leopard, its bones protruding from the rotting flesh. Its tail was abnormally long, segmented, and ended in a revolting circular maw that brimmed with needle-like teeth. The creature's own yellow canines, though, were much more terrifying — each was as long as a greatsword and covered in dried blood.

The abomination was so large that its shadow covered the entire cohort. Much worse… the moment Sunny saw it, he felt an invisible pressure wash over him, filling his heart with a sense of dread.

It was a Great Beast.

…Before the monstrosity could plummet on the cohort, two towering shadow tentacles rose from the ground and entangled its front limbs, slowing the creature down. The beast's skeletal jaws snapped viciously, obliterating the manifested shadows in an instant, but it gave the members of the cohort enough time, at least, to dash in different directions.

The abomination landed on the spot where they had been a split second ago. The ghastly tail of the creature was already shooting back with terrifying speed, its circular maw opened to bite into Cassie's flesh. The blind girl sidestepped, barely avoiding being torn apart by it, and brought her staff down on the segmented tail.

A moment later, she was flung aside like an ant.

On the other side, the beast swiped its rotting paw in the direction of Sunny and Nephis. Augmented by the shadows and soul flame, both managed to dodge the lethal blow… even if it was just by a hair's breadth.

But as soon as they did, the creature's jaws were already in front of them, ready to snap shut and turn the two humans into chunks of torn meat. Neither Sunny nor Nephis had regained their balance yet — there was no time for them to evade.

Luckily, at that moment, Saint crashed into the side of the abomination's head, using her shield as a siege ram. The power of the blow was terrible enough to bring a fortress wall down, but the skull of the Great Beast only swung to the side a little. It did not seem as if the creature had sustained any damage at all.

And all of that — from the moment the creature landed to now — only took a split second to happen.

'Not good…'

The Azure Serpent had been a king among beasts, while this one was merely a beast… and yet, it was a Great Nightmare Creature. It was too powerful, too fast, and too resilient.

'Can we defeat it?'

Sunny knew that they could. With his Shadows, Cassie's Echoes, and especially the Crown of Dawn… they had a non-negligible chance of defeating this monstrosity.

However, they could also all die here.

'I don't want to die…'

Even knowing that he would most likely return to the starting point of the loop, Sunny still shuddered at the thought of having his flesh torn apart and his bones ground to dust. He was even more reluctant to watch his companions be killed by the ghastly abomination.

'It's simple... don't die, then.'

Gritting his teeth, he lunged forward.

Chapter-1413: Falling Trees

The Quiet Dancer zipped through the air and hit the base of the Great Beast's revolting tail. However, the sharp tip of the temperamental Echo bounced off the tough hide of the creature without leaving even a scratch on it.

At the same time, Fiend growled and put himself in the path of the creature's crushing paw. The towering ogre was barely able to grasp it — the decaying claws of the abomination struck him on the chest, leaving deep grooves in the black silver. The ground under the gluttonous Shadow caved in, but he remained standing.

For a moment.

Then, the horrid beast pushed Fiend down and covered him with its massive paw. At the same time, Saint dodged the snapping jaws and lashed out with her sword, leaving a thin crack on the creature's skeletal snout.

The dead sybil and the clockwork swordsmen attacked the enemy from behind. Nightmare rammed into it, lowering his head to gore the abominations with his horns.

Then, all of them were flung aside. The steel mannequin dissolved into a rain of sparks, destroyed. The sybil collided with a trunk of an ancient pine, shattered it into splinters, and fell to the ground, unmoving. Nightmare barely managed to dissolve into the shadows in time, but still lost a large chunk of flesh. Saint blocked the blow with her shield and slid a dozen meters back.

The Shadows and the Echoes only lasted a second against the Great Beast's fury.

But that second gave Sunny time to call upon the shadows and manifest them into the Shadowspawn Shell. He wished he could

assume the form of the Onyx Serpent, but it was poorly suited for battles on land.

A tide of darkness flowed from the open gate of the Shadow Lantern, rising to form into countless chains. They bound the ghastly creature like ropes, but were torn apart a moment later.

Sunny, Nephis, and Jet launched their attack.

Neph's silvery longsword ignited with blinding radiance as she dove under the abomination's jaws and thrust her weapon into its neck. Sunny delivered a devastating blow to the monstrous leopard's snout — empowered by the Crown of Dawn, the Sin of Solace sent a few small fragments of bone flying. Jet lunged at the Great Beast from the side, aiming to plunge her glaive into its very soul.

But before she could, the long, flexible tail of the horrid creature whipped around. Jet barely managed to avoid it by dashing back, while Sunny was not so lucky. His movements were suppressed by the need to keep himself away from the harrowing jaws, and so, the circular maw at the end of the segmented tail greedily closed on the side of the shadowspawn.

The right shoulder and side of his shell were entirely destroyed. Sunny instantly lost two of his four arms — one simply disappeared, the other fell apart, revealing shredded human flesh beneath.

Neph's sword pierced the Great Beast's neck, but before she could deal significant damage, a lightning-fast strike of a mighty paw destroyed the radiant blade and sent her rolling away.

Sunny stumbled back, desperately trying to prevent his shell from crumbling and using the shadows of the misty forest to try and hastily repair the damage.

They had managed to make the Great Beast bleed… or rather, delivered it a wound. The decaying creature did not seem like something that had blood running through its veins. However…

'Does it even mean anything?'

Just in a few seconds, one of Cassie's Echoes had been destroyed,

while the other one was heavily damaged. Nightmare was already wounded. Fiend had escaped from beneath the creature's paw, and Saint seemed unharmed as well… but Sunny himself was already injured. His arm was a mess of torn flesh, and although he would not suffer from blood loss, it was in a bad state.

Would they be able to kill the ghastly abomination?

For a split second, the violence subsided.

Nephis had nimbly jumped to her feet and was already summoning a different weapon. Jet had regained her balance. Sunny switched to a one-hand grip and prepared both of his swords for an attack. Saint was already closing distance…

Cassie was moving forward, the Guiding Light shimmering in the fog.

The decaying leopard opened its skeletal maw and let out a chilling, gurgling growl.

When Sunny heard it, his vision blurred slightly.

'A mental attack?'

His resistance to mind attacks was high enough to shrug it off, but he felt cold dread nevertheless. Handling the overwhelming physical might of the enormous Great Beast was already close to impossible… if the abominations possessed more means of subjugating its enemies, this battle would swiftly turn from ugly to hopeless.

…It was then that another sound reached their ears.

Echoing eerily in the fog, a loud crack resounded, as if a tree had snapped and was falling somewhere in the forest.

The horrid leopard suddenly froze.

Its skeletal snout turned, and it lowered its body low to the ground. The segmented tail rose like that of a scorpion, protecting the creature's back.

'What… what is this?'

Why did it look as if the Great Beast was… afraid?

Before Sunny could really react, the abominations suddenly moved… and rushed away, disappearing into the mist. The wind risen by its departure threw Neph's hair into disarray.

The members of the cohort remained motionless, confused and unnerved by what had just happened. Keeping their weapons in defensive stances, they covered each other's backs and stared tensely into the fog.

"What… what is going on?"

Jet's voice sounded grim and hoarse.

The thick fog veiled everything around. All they could see were the nearest trees and the cold ground under their feet. The ghastly leopard had disappeared like a ghost — there was nothing left but silence.

Then, another loud crack resounded somewhere in the forest, followed by a muffled rustling. Sunny spun, trying to pinpoint where the noise was coming from.

There was another echoing crack, and then another, louder one. Because of the mist, it was hard to tell where the trees were falling, and why. However… the cracks were growing closer.

'Damn it!'

Slowly, the disparate cracks grew into a cacophony of noise, and Sunny felt the ground quaking beneath his feet.

…Then, everything suddenly grew silent once again.

Standing back to back with Nephis, Cassie, and Jet, he stared into the fog, feeling cold sweat rolling down his face.

The blind girl suddenly shifted, sharply turning around. Following her motion, Sunny saw something dark flying at them from the mist. Cursing, he dodged and felt a large object hitting the ground behind him.

Spinning around, Sunny raised the Sin of Solace… and froze.

His eyes widened.

Out there in front of him, laying on the ground, was the ghastly leopard. Or rather...

Its head.

The skeletal snout was shattered, and the gaping hollows where the abomination's eyes should have been were dark and empty. There was nothing below the creature's mangled neck, but it did not seem as if it had been severed. Instead, it seemed as if someone — or something — had violently ripped the abomination's head off with nothing but brutal strength.

The Great Beast was dead.

Sunny couldn't help but tremble.

'What… what the hell? What could have ripped a Great Beast apart?!'

Flinching, he forced himself to look away from the revolting head and peered into the fog.

'Where is it… where…'

He couldn't see anything. He couldn't hear anything. He couldn't sense anything.

Sunny gritted his teeth and forced himself to calm down.

'Cassie.'

Even if he didn't know from which direction the attack would come from, Cassie would. She could see a few seconds into the future, after all — it was all but impossible to get her by surprise.

Turning slightly, Sunny tensely studied the blind girl. She was holding the Guiding Light in front of her, ready to deflect a sudden attack. It seemed that she had not felt anything dangerous, yet…

'Maybe it's go…'

But then, Cassie's shoulders trembled slightly. Her Aspect Ability had shown her the future.

...She did not turn to face the unseen enemy, though.

Instead, her hands dropped, and she lowered her head.

Which meant…

That in the future Cassie saw, there was no escape.

Sunny stared at her in disbelief.

'No!'

A moment later, he was swallowed by a heavy shadow.

Looking up, Sunny saw a hand stretching toward them from the fog above. It seemed like a human hand… except that it was almost the same size as the Great Beast had been. He could see the lines on the giant palm, and the blackened, broken, bloodied nails at the ends of the long, bruised fingers.

The giant hand moved deceptively slow… but before Sunny could even blink, it was already upon them.

Without ever slowing down, it smashed into the members of the cohort, squashing them like bugs.

Sunny died.

This time, his death was mercifully swift.

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...Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened.

The deck of the Chain Breaker felt solid under his feet. This time, he simply peered into the fog instead of looking around… not that he could see anything.

His gaze was dark and hollow.

'...I failed again.'

His face was pale and unmoving.

In front of him, the mists of Wind Flower flowed slowly, swirling in indifference as they devoured the world.

Everything was as it had been before.

Chapter-1414: Bone Garden

Nephis and Cassie were talking about the Guiding Light. With no one noticing his hollow eyes, Sunny lingered for a while, then walked over to Nightmare. He reached to adjust the stirrups and froze.

After a moment of hesitation, Sunny climbed into the saddle instead.

His companions looked at him in confusion.

"Sunny?"

He stared into the mist.

"Stay here for a while. Please. I'll… I'll be back soon."

With that, Nightmare leaped off the deck of the Chain Breaker and carried him into the fog.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

The ghastly leopard had already been bad enough, and yet… Sunny felt that the cohort would have been able to slay the dreadful creature, if at a steep cost.

But that bloodied hand…

They had not even caught a glimpse of the nebulous being that wandered the mist, snapping the towering pine trees like matchsticks. It had torn a Great Beast apart and obliterated them so casually… how was Sunny supposed to contend with something that oppressive and ineffable?

It felt as though something was pressing down heavily on his heart.

Was it… fear?

'Damn it!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny guided Nightmare into the misty forest.

He spent some time searching for Jet, found her, and brought her back to the Chain Breaker.

He waited for her to explain how she had ended up on Wind Flower, then told everyone about the time loop. There were some deviations from the previous conversations, but mostly, it went almost exactly the same.

In the end, Nephis suggested going after Effie once again.

Sunny stared at her in silence, remembering the brief, but gruesome moment of all of them being crushed under the giant, bloodied palm. Then, he shook his head somberly.

"We tried already. As I said… it didn't end well."

Nephis met his gaze, a subtle frown twisting the beautiful lines of her face.

"We can do better this time. What's the alternative? Give up and run?"

She shook her head.

"No, we can't even run away until nightfall. Before then, you won't have enough essence to empower the Chain Breaker and carry us across the vortex."

Sunny sighed and rose to his feet. Glancing at his companions, he said:

"I agree, we must continue trying. But we don't need to keep trying the same thing. Our combined strength is not enough to brave the mist, at least not when we don't know anything about the dangers it hides."

Jet leaned back, then winced when her wounded back touched the bulkhead and returned to her previous position.

"So, what do you suggest?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Use speed instead of strength. The group of us was intercepted and killed, but a single swift scout can make it through. Basically, I'll go retrieve Effie the same way I retrieved Jet. You three stay here, recover, and treat her wounds."

Nephis lingered for a while. It was hard to read her expression, but she seemed reluctant to let Sunny take all the risk.

"I don't like it."

He shrugged.

"What does that have to do with anything? Like it or not, that seems to be the best option right now."

They discussed the situation some more, but in the end, Sunny managed to convince the other members of the cohort to stay hidden aboard the Chain Breaker.

It wasn't that unreasonable, anyway. Nephis was suffering from essence exhaustion, Jet was heavily injured, and Cassie did not possess a lot of physical prowess — despite her insidious Aspect, she was at her weakest in battles against overwhelmingly powerful adversaries.

Considering her lacking physicality, an enemy who was fast, strong, and inevitable enough would leave no opportunity for the blind girl to exploit. Sensing a few seconds into the future was useless if those seconds did not allow her to change anything.

"I'm going."

Saying those words, Sunny once again rode Nightmare and dove into the mist.

'I can do it… I can… can I do it?'

This time, he was holding the Guiding Light in his hand. The softly

shining crystal at the tip of the sacred staff was pointing deeper inland.

However…

Sunny couldn't follow its guidance directly. Somewhere out there in front of him, Undying Slaughter was hiding in the mist. To his left was the territory of the Great Beast, the decaying leopard. That was also where they had met the harrowing giant the last time.

So, this time, Sunny turned right.

Reaching the end of the beach, he and Nightmare turned into shadows and scaled the black cliffs. Sunny had passed this way once already, the first time he had carried Jet back. However, that time, they had been moving along the outer border of the island, so he did not know what was waiting for him on the surface.

There was only the same forest, and the same fog. Leaving the shadows, he sent Nightmare running across the narrow strip of land between the edge of the cliffs and trees.

It was some time before the trees receded, and the forest suddenly came to an end.

Sunny stopped his steed, looking forward tensely.

In front of him, the pine trees gave way to an open field. Most of it was obscured by mist, but he could see vague shapes rising from it like tall pillars. They emanated a chilling, dire, and vaguely familiar feeling.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then turned into a shadow and cautiously slithered forward.

Soon, the tall shapes revealed themselves fully. He grew somber after recognizing them for what they were — the towering pillars were, in fact, giant bones.

The entire shore in this part of Wind Flower was littered by them, as if it was a graveyard for all kinds of gargantuan beings. From the look of the ancient remains, the leviathans that had left them behind

were all Nightmare Creatures — abominable, dreadful, and appalling dwellers of the depths.

Sunny was both shocked and unnerved by witnessing the skeletal remains of so many depth dwellers.

Had their bones been carried here by someone? Had the abominations come to this shore to die on their own over the ages? Or had there been a titanic battle here that led to all these monstrous creatures being slaughtered by an unknown assailant?

He did not know.

What he did know, however…

Suppressing his panic, Sunny hid in the skull of an especially large creature and looked ahead.

There, no more than two dozen meters away from him, something dark and massive had just moved in the fog.

Chapter-1415: Empty Shells

Sunny would have held his breath if he wasn't a shadow at the moment. Out there, in front of him, something massive was hiding in the fog. If not for the slight movement just now, he would have mistaken it for another pile of towering bones… that movement might have saved his life.

'Curse it…'

Because of the mist, he could only see a vague, dark shape. The details were obscured, and he could tell that the creature was enormous. It also instilled him with a deep, bestial feeling of dread.

A strange, sweet smell permeated the air.

Sunny froze, hiding in the skull of a dead leviathan. He did not know what to do — moving forward was out of the question. But moving back could potentially inform the enemy of his presence as well.

That only left Shadow Step.

However, before he tried to slip away, Sunny lingered for a few moments.

Something was gnawing at him. Why did this presence feel… familiar?

He had felt a strange familiarity ever since entering the monster graveyard. It was faint, but unmistakable.

'Why?'

Had he been to this part of the island already, in one of the revolutions that he did not remember? No, that did not make any sense. Before becoming aware of the loop, Sunny had to have

repeated the same actions over and over — going forward alone to rescue Jet, and dying to Undying Slaughter's ghostly blade.

So how could anything on Wind Flower feel familiar?

At that moment, a strong gale blew from the direction of the vortex, and the mist receded.

The giant creature hiding in the fog was revealed in all its eerie, grotesque beauty.

Sunny shuddered.

The massive shape he had noticed… was a revolting butterfly.

The butterfly's wings and back were black, but its body and underbelly were the color of white bone. It had six long, seemingly fragile legs that ended in sharp points, and two enormous, faceted eyes that were like orbs of pure darkness. Between them was a disturbingly long, oily-black beak, which was currently bent into a spiral like an elephant's trunk. Two long antennae rose from its head.

The eerie black butterfly was about a hundred meters in size.

It was the same Great Monster that had battled the Serpent King for an entire month for the right to devour the remains of the Black Turtle.

'The… the Dark Butterfly? What is it doing here?'

For a few moments, Sunny's mind was in turmoil. He had traveled so far into the past from the beginning of the Nightmare, and yet, this grotesque horror somehow ended catching up to him nevertheless. Had it been following him and Nephis from the start?

But then, Sunny felt a hint of relief.

Although this abomination was almost exactly like the Great Monster he was familiar with, it was also subtly different. The pattern of bone-white scales on its belly was not the same. The jagged edges of its wings were not the same. The length of its antennae was not the same, either.

Sunny had been staring at the original Dark Butterfly for an entire month, so he remembered its ethereally alien appearance in perfect detail.

This one… might have belonged to the same tribe of Nightmare Creatures, but was a different abomination altogether.

Which was not to say that it wasn't equally harrowing.

'Damn it!'

First a Great Beast, and now a Great Monster… just how impossible was this Third Nightmare supposed to be? And here he was, hoping that things would go easier if he chose a different path this time.

Sunny swallowed his resentment and stared at the gargantuan abomination. The thing was much, much larger than the Chain Breaker… if they tried to fly away from the island and were caught by it in the air, there was no doubt what fate awaited them.

Things had just gotten much more complicated.

'I'll have to go around the monster graveyard, for now.'

The mist was already flowing back to hide the eerie creature. Before it did, Sunny followed a whim and peered into the soul of the Dark Butterfly, wanting to make sure that it, too, was a Great Monster.

Then, he froze, dumbfounded. A few moments passed before a coherent thought could form in his mind:

'...What?'

Beneath the surface of the aerial giant's carapace, where the tendrils of the revolting darkness were supposed to be… there was nothing.

There were no nodes of spreading Corruption. And neither were there radiant suns of shining soul cores. Instead, the creature's soul was empty.

No. There was no soul inside that monstrous body at all.

The Dark Butterfly was…

'It's Hollow?'

Sunny knew of Awakened who had lost their souls in the Dream Realm, and were left as empty shells — living, but truly dead. However, he had never heard of anything similar happening to Nightmare Creatures.

How could it, if abominations did not travel between the two worlds in their sleep? Their rotten souls were always safely anchored within their bodies.

Of course… if an abomination's soul was somehow destroyed without damaging the body, there was a small chance that the body would continue to live on. Empty and void of conscience.

He hesitated for a few moments, and then cautiously left the skull of a dead leviathan. Sliding closer to the giant butterfly, Sunny extended his senses and studied its shadow.

The shadow was empty, like the shadows of all inanimate objects were.

The Dark Butterfly that had frightened him so much… was it no threat at all?

Sunny remained in the form of the shadow for a while, observing the gargantuan creature. The Great Monster sat among the bones with its wings laying listlessly on the ground. It seemed to be breathing, but other than that, it remained absolutely still. Its giant, faceted eyes were dull and empty.

After a while, Sunny returned to his tangible form and cautiously approached the creature. Even when he walked to stand under its terrifying beak, the Dark Butterfly did not react.

'It truly is Hollow.'

He hesitated for a few moments, then looked down. There, in the shadow of the creature's wings, clusters of revolting eggs were embedded into slimy cocoons. Each egg was twice the size of Sunny

and translucent. He could see the viscous, milky liquid and the shapes of giant worm-like larvae within.

The shadows of the eggs were just as lifeless as the butterfly itself.

Sunny stared at the eggs for a while, then threw a glance at the Great Monster. Then, holding his breath, he walked forward and sliced one open with the Sin of Solace.

The revolting larva fell apart and convulsed, dead.

However, the Spell did not announce a kill. He did not receive shadow fragments, either.

There were no soul shards in the repulsive flesh of the dead, giant worm.

'...Hollow.'

Sunny shivered.

'What is going on?'

Suddenly terrified, he backed away, then turned around and walked into the mist. It took him a lot of effort to not run.

All of it… the torturous deaths, the suffocating mist, the orchard of ancient bones, the Hollow monster… was too much to endure.

Walking among the remains of dead horrors, enveloped in milky fog, Sunny couldn't help but feel that this hell was everything there was to the world. Everything else — all that existed in his memory — felt like a strange, distant dream.

Climbing into the saddle of Nightmare, he raised the Guiding Light and slumped, trembling.

After a while, he said hoarsely:

"...Let's go."

Soon, the towering bones disappeared into the mist.

Chapter-1416: Invisible Scars

As Nightmare carried him away from the graveyard of horrors, Sunny managed to regain some of his composure. By then, they were moving deeper inland, following the light of the sacred staff. Effie was supposed to be at the end of that light.

As time passed, he couldn't help but think back to the Hollow Butterfly.

The Great Monster must have landed on the hidden island a long time ago — but also only a few hours ago — to lay eggs. Then, it was caught in the time loop and somehow ended up with its soul destroyed.

Sunny had never heard about a Nightmare Creature becoming Hollow, but it was not impossible. The question was… how had it happened?

The obvious answer was that the gargantuan creature had been attacked by someone who could destroy souls. When a soul was destroyed, the body usually died with it… but on rare occasions, it survived. That was how Hollow humans appeared, so the same thing could have happened to this Great Monster.

There certainly could be a creature capable of shattering souls on this hellish island… and powerful enough to slay a Great Monster. In fact, Sunny did not even need to ponder long to think of one.

Wasn't Undying Slaughter a perfect candidate?

Killing a Great Monster was all but a hopeless endeavor for the members of the cohort, but to the mist wraith, it would be no different from what facing Carapace Centurions had been for the Sleepers of the Forgotten Shore.

Fatally dangerous, but not at all impossible.

There could be more soul breakers on Wind Flower, as well.

That said…

Somehow, Sunny did not think that that was what had happened.

Not because he didn't think that Undying Slaughter was incapable of slaying the Dark Butterfly, but because he didn't think that she was capable of doing so without leaving any trace of the battle.

The Dark Butterfly was a Great Monster, and as such, it possessed two Corruption Cores. That meant that the Defiled wraith had to deliver at least two blows to its soul in order to destroy it. Would the aerial horror have remained idle while it was being killed?

Not a chance. If it had been attacked, the whole place would have been turned upside down with one flip of its enormous wings.

And yet, there was no trace of destruction around the monstrous butterfly. The bones surrounding it were unharmed, and the ground was unbroken. All its eggs were whole.

It was almost as if…

The Great Monster had simply ceased to be, peacefully and without even noticing.

The same went for the revolting larvae.

'How could it be?'

Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

He had no reason to make this conclusion… but he felt that he had an idea.

Was it because of the time loop?

Riding through the mist, Sunny gripped the Guiding Light tighter.

The Sin of Solace had asked him before how many deaths Sunny

would be able to endure before turning into a drooling fool. The answer was… quite a lot. But there was no question that he had a limit.

After spending a few years on Wind Flower, his mental state would inevitably deteriorate. Although his flesh was miraculously restored every time he returned to the starting point of the loop, the mental scars remained.

What about spiritual scars?

Sunny did not know a lot about souls, but he knew that they could be damaged. They could also be healed, and possessed the ability to slowly mend themselves, just like flesh did.

And just like flesh… there was a limit to how much punishment souls could withstand.

So, what was going to happen to his soul after he spent a long time being killed and reborn in the loop? Would it be covered by scars and gaping wounds?

Was it going to collapse, eventually?

Maybe it would take a year, or a few years, or a few hundred years. Or a few months.

When would his soul reach its limit?

Sunny was unique, because he had become aware of the loop and kept his memories after returning to the past. As far as he knew, no one except him bore the mental scars of the previous revolutions. Their minds were wiped clean.

But maybe their souls weren't, at least not entirely.

So, if the Dark Butterfly had landed on Wind Flower countless years ago… maybe even the soul of a Great Monster could not withstand the terrible curse of the whirlpool of time.

'I… I have to be careful.'

If a Great Monster — a creature with a soul infinitely more vast and potent than his — had been made Hollow by the time loop, then Sunny would be, as well.

He had never consciously relied on the nature of the repeating time, but deep down inside, Sunny was consoled by the thought that his failures would be erased, and he would get another chance.

And then another, and another, and another…

But all this time, he was most likely on a timer.

Time was merciless, and even when it repeated itself, living beings were not meant to be eternal.

'I have to make each revolution count.'

Steeling himself, Sunny looked into the surrounding mist and forced himself to calm down.

Right now, he needed to survive the trip into the depths of the island, find Effie, and return to the Chain Breaker. That was all he had to think about.

There were many harrowing creatures hiding in the fog, without a doubt. But he was one of the most elusive Awakened in the world… even in the Antarctic Center, when everyone had perished, Sunny managed to escape alive.

He might not be able to slay Undying Slaughter, the dreadful giant wandering the mist, and the other abominations trapped on Wind Flower… but he would at least have a chance to run away from them.

'Not the most courageous statement, but who needs courage, anyway? Being a coward is what keeps people alive.'

He vaguely remembered lecturing Master Roan on the topic. That past seemed so distant…

Sunny wondered how the White Feather Clan was doing. By now, Antarctica must have been completely decimated. Had Saint Tyris

and her people been able to evacuate in time, or were they gone, too?

Shaking his head, he threw all unnecessary thoughts away and concentrated on his surroundings.

Nightmare had carried him far inland, by now. They were once again in the pine forest, but… did it only seem that way, or was the mist less thick here?

Somewhat surprised, Sunny realized that he could see much further in the fog than he had before. The ground was also inclined, as if they were climbing a hill.

The higher they climbed and the closer to the center of Wind Flower they traveled, the less oppressive the mist became.

And then, when they finally crested the hill…

Sunny stopped Nightmare and looked up, feeling a cold shadow fall upon him.

In front of him, some distance away, a tall tower rose into the sky.

Its windows were dark, except for one.

At the very top of the tower, a single window shone with a bright, warm, welcoming light.

Chapter-1417: War Beast

Sunny remained motionless for a while, looking at the landscape in front of him.

The tower stood on a tall black cliff, perched on top of it like a grey obelisk. There were stone steps climbing down the cliff from its ornate gate, leading to a bridge that arched across the wide moat. Surrounded by the forest from all sides, the tower was like an island in the sea of swirling white mist.

The light in one of its windows was not the only peculiar thing Sunny had noticed, too.

The most striking detail was the moat itself. The water in it was churning and flowing, moving endlessly in a circle. The current was powerful enough to dissuade Sunny from trying to cross it — not that he would consider doing such a thing on an island surrounded by a mysterious whirlpool of time.

That made the bridge the only feasible way of getting to the tower apart from flying. The bridge, however…

Sunny's expression dimmed.

The bridge was littered with inhuman bones. There were a few living Nightmare Creatures standing on it, as well — all of them stiff and eerily motionless, as if petrified. Just one look at that scene made Sunny reluctant to go anywhere near the bridge.

He did not need to, anyway. The Guiding Light was pointing past the tower, at the vast expanse of the misty forest behind it. Effie seemed to have landed on the opposite side of the island from Jet.

Still, it was not going to hurt him to observe the tower some more. It was the former citadel of the powerful Seeker who had once lived on

Wind Flower, after all — even though investigating it was not the reason why Sunny and his companions had arrived at the island, he had a sneaking suspicion that they would end up having to, somehow.

After staring at the tower for a while longer, Sunny noticed that there were runes carved into the base of the black cliff. They were hard to notice from a distance due to the color of the weathered rock, but he had no doubt that there was a massive enchantment of some sort surrounding the Seeker's citadel.

Perhaps the bones littering the bridge ended up there because of the enchantment.

Finally, Sunny looked up and focused on the single illuminated window at the top of the tower.

'I do wonder what is hidden there.'

But it was not his business. Not in this revolution, at least…

Rather, Sunny was concerned that the Nightmare Creatures standing motionlessly on the bridge would regain their senses and catch his scent. Throwing a look at them, he grimaced.

'Corrupted Tyrant, Great Beast… a Terror…'

The last one did not even look like something that should be able to exist on land. How had that thing reached so far inland? Sunny shook his head, reluctant to find out.

He was ready to send Nightmare away when the ground quaked subtly under them. Instantly, Sunny paled.

Then, the familiar sound of snapping trees reached his ears, making the blood in his veins turn to ice.

A split second later, both the rider and his steed disappeared, turning into shadows.

Hiding in the darkness, Sunny suppressed his fear and looked in the direction from which the cracking sound had come. Frozen, he

watched as a towering figure slowly appeared from the mist.

'D—damnation!'

Some distance away, something giant was hunched among the trees. As Sunny watched, petrified, the terrifying giant slowly straightened and towered above the ancient pines, dwarfing them with its impossible height. The tips of the trees barely reached its waist.

'That thing is… is at least a hundred meters tall…'

The giant was vaguely human-like in appearance. At first, Sunny had mistaken it for a beast, but then realized that the ragged fur covering its body was merely a crude cloak sewn from the vast hide of an unknown abomination.

The giant... seemed to be female.

Her gaunt, gargantuan body was brimming with terrifying, primal power. There were many bruises, deep cuts, and gaping lacerations marring her dirty skin, most seeping with rotten puss. Her long hair was matted and wild, hanging down messily to obscure her face. Rugged and wrapped in furs, the giantess seemed more bestial than human… and yet, she was one. Or had been once, at least.

Sunny felt unable to move. While he remained in place, the giantess raised one of her enormous, bruised, painfully familiar hands. In it, a grotesque creature that resembled a massive black octopus was struggling desperately, its long tentacles whipping around with enough force to turn the ancient pines into clouds of dust.

A viscous, corrosive liquid streamed from them, dissolving everything it touched.

However, the giantess did not seem bothered at all. The black acid rolled from her skin like water, not dealing any damage to it. A few moments later, she brought the struggling horror to her mouth and bit into it viciously, tearing away an enormous chunk of revolting flesh.

The matted hair parted, revealing her bloodied, twisted face.

The giantess was missing one eye, while the other burned with madness and indescribable hunger. Watching the enormous octopus being greedily devoured, Sunny finally realized how the decaying leopard had perished, and whom the hand that had killed the members of the cohort in the last revolution belonged to.

His thoughts turned cold.

'...Devouring Beast.'

Indeed, the nebulous being that wandered the mist… was none other than the Devouring Beast, one of the Six Plagues of the Great River. Just like Undying Slaughter, she was also here, on Wind Flower.

She was the future, Defiled version of Effie.

'Two of them...'

It... made sense, really. Sunny had theorized that the mist wraith had been sent here to satiate her Flaw. Why would the Devouring Beast be any different? Her hunger was just like Jet's need to kill living beings. Without the cities full of humans to devour, it could only lead to disaster.

How could a creature that always needed to kill and a creature that always needed to consume remain in Verge? If these two abominable slayers were not sent somewhere where their Flaws could be contained, they would have brought the city of the Defiled to extinction, as well.

Had they come here voluntarily? Or had the Dread Lord lured and imprisoned them here once the sybils were defeated?

In any case, the situation of the cohort did not change.

Sunny stared at the harrowing giantess for a few more moments, then rushed away as fast as he could. He and Nightmare had to escape before she noticed them.

'I guess… I did find Effie.'

However, that abomination was not the Effie he wanted to find.

Chapter-1418: Point of Return

Luckily, Sunny managed to slide down the hill and escape into the mist before Devouring Beast noticed him. Still, he didn't dare to leave the embrace of shadows for a while.

'Effie…'

Effie's Aspect had always been uniquely powerful — which was no surprise, considering its Transcendent Rank. Even on the Forgotten Shore, there had been few people more capable than her. Some, like Caster of Han Li Clan, had been superior to the solitary huntress in certain facets of physical combat, but none had been as well-rounded.

That was one of the reasons why Effie had survived years of hunting the Dark City abominations alone.

Her Aspect was all about battle and physical prowess… so, Sunny was not sure that Devouring Beast even had means of destroying his intangible form. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

…His heart was cold and heavy.

'How do I fight something like that?'

Effie's Dormant Ability granted her a powerful and, more importantly, comprehensive physical augmentation. She was inconceivably strong, fast, enduring, resilient… now that Sunny was a Tyrant, the gap between them was not vast, but she was still superior to him in certain aspects.

The same went for her Awakened Ability. It basically made her skin as tough as steel… Sunny, on the other hand, had his Marble Shell. The two could be compared, but although the Shell was more versatile, it was not as stalwart in terms of pure defensive potential.

Of course, he had Shadow Step instead, making him much more mobile and elusive on and outside the battlefield. He had Shadow Manifestation, as well, while Effie's Ascended Ability was meant to empower her allies.

So, there was no question about who would win in a duel. No matter how much Sunny admired his boisterous friend, he knew that she stood no chance in a fight against him. With Shadow Dance, it would not even be close… much more so if his Shadows were involved.

But that was Effie. Devouring Beast, on the other hand…

Was a Defiled Saint. Her Transformation was to become a towering giant, and that giant inherited the benefits of her other Aspect Abilities, as well — all of them elevated to a higher Rank. The strength of a dozen men, the skin of steel.

Her gargantuan figure would also be much more visible on a battlefield, making it so that entire armies would be able to see her and benefit from her Ascended Ability.

'What a monster…'

Sunny was already terrified at the thought of having to face the mist wraith in a battle. The bestial giant... was, in a sense, even more harrowing.

'Damn it! Damn it! Since when do I have to fight Saints on a constant basis?! And how did the Plagues all Transcend, anyway?!'

Facing Dire Fang was supposed to be an exception, not the rule!

Eventually, he decided that there was enough distance between him and the tower to return to his human form. Diving out of the shadows, Sunny leaned on the trunk of a pine tree, breathed in deeply, and then looked at the Guiding Light.

This escape through the shadows had consumed a lot of his essence, probably because he had brought the sacred staff with him. Usually, Sunny was able to pull a certain weight of inanimate objects into Shadow Step… but perhaps because of the staff's divine nature, it had taken a lot of effort to carry it with him.

To his relief, the Guiding Light was still pointing forward, not back to the tower. For a few moments there, Sunny had been concerned that it would lead him to Devouring Beast instead of Effie.

He hesitated for a bit, then thought about the bestial giant. The radiance of the soul crystal did not change.

After a moment, Sunny remembered how Cassie had described getting the sacred staff to work and coughed in embarrassment.

'Come on… really…'

Then, he concentrated and thought:

'M... Miss Guiding Light, can you guide me to Devouring Beast… please?'

Despite how foolish Sunny felt, the staff did not react. Its workings were really mysterious.

Shaking his head, Sunny thought about Nephis. The radiance of the soul crystal changed, pointing back to where the Chain Breaker was. When he thought about Effie, it returned to its previous state.

'Strange.'

Pondering the mystery of how the Guiding Light worked, he commanded Nightmare to emerge from the shadows, climbed into the saddle, and continued traveling through the mist.

Wind Flower… turned out to be extremely dangerous, but not as dangerous as Sunny had imagined it to be. There were many harrowing abominations trapped in its fog, certainly — but not as many as he had feared.

There were three reasons for it.

The first one was pretty obvious, by now. Cassie had suggested that all Nightmare Creatures that had been caught by the vortex and managed to reach the island over the centuries were still here, reliving the same period of time over and over again inside the loop. She was both right and wrong.

The mist was indeed hiding countless terrifying abominations. Sunny shuddered at the thought of having to fight them all… no matter how powerful, cunning, and lucky the members of the cohort were, they would inevitably die under the onslaught of these ancient horrors — over and over again, until the souls collapsed.

But then again, not all of these creatures were still… whole. Many were motionless and empty, just like the Dark Butterfly he had found in the bone orchard was. The circular passage of time had long turned them Hollow.

Of those that remained, many were already dead.

While moving through the misty forest, Sunny found many areas where the trees had been broken, and bloodied remains of devoured Nightmare Creatures littered the ground. That was where Devouring Beast had passed through.

In other places, Sunny found ghastly abominations laying on the ground, dead, not a single wound visible on their bodies. That was where Undying Slaughter had passed through.

The two Defiled had already eviscerated many of the prisoners of Wind Flower, making the island safer for the members of the cohort in an ironic twist of fate. Without their bloodthirst, Sunny would have never made it that far in a single revolution.

He still had to flee and evade many terrible creatures, using Nightmare's speed to escape them. Luck was on his side.

And yet… Sunny still failed to find Effie, this time.

At some point, a wide chasm barred the way forward. Not knowing how long it was and not wanting to prolong the journey by riding around it, Sunny reluctantly dismounted and climbed down. His hope was to reach the bottom of the chasm, walk to the other side, and return to the surface.

However, a boundless swarm of monstrous black millipedes was waiting for him in the moist darkness. Much worse, the revolting vermin were somehow able to hunt him even in his intangible form.

Sunny was not devoured by the tide of worm-like creatures, but he was forced to move deeper into the chasm to escape them, eventually ending up in a system of caves below the surface of the island.

There, he felt the approach of the night. Sunny knew that the suns were setting because the enchantment of the Crown of Twilight suddenly activated, replenishing his spent essence.

'I… I need to get back to the surface.'

It was easier said than done, though.

The system of caves was not too vast, but he had to move with extreme caution. There was no need to thoroughly scout the caverns to know that there were indescribable horrors hiding in their darkness.

Indeed, not long after, he met a creature that tested his ability to remain composed. Even then, Sunny managed to flee with his life… but not before losing several chunks of flesh and most of the skin on his left arm.

He persisted.

Covered in blood, tired, he and Nightmare continued searching for an exit from the caverns. Eventually, Sunny felt the approaching dawn.

And before he knew it…

'I... I feel...'

***

Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened. He was standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker, surrounded by mist.

'W—what?'

He... was back to the start. Even though he had not died, the time still reversed, and was now repeating itself.

A stunned expression appeared on Sunny's face.

'Did I… reach the end of the loop?'

He felt certain that he had.

The loop only encompassed a single day.

Chapter-1419: Mother of Learning

Looking into the swirling mist, Sunny let out a long sigh. He suddenly felt tired.

Or rather, not so suddenly. Time was repeating itself inside the loop, and while his body was restored to its initial condition at the start of each revolution, mental exhaustion remained.

The Chain Breaker had just landed on the shore of Wind Flower, but Sunny himself… he had already spent an entire day on highest alert, in constant tension, playing a lethal game of cat and mouse with dreadful abominations. And that was after dying miserably several times in a row.

Of course, he felt tired.

Frowning, Sunny went about the usual routine of asking Cassie and Nephis to wait, then riding Nightmare into the mist to find Jet. Then, he brought her back to the Chain Breaker and explained the nature of Wind Flower to the members of the cohort once again.

Things were getting… repetitive.

If there was one constantly changing thing about the time loop, though, it was the Sin of Solace. The sword wraith had all kinds of hateful comments to whip him with, coming up with new ones in every revolution. Sunny was almost glad to have some variety, even if it was both infuriating and hurtful.

After settling the matters on the beached ship, Sunny ventured to find Effie for the second time.

However, he failed again.

Sunny did not even make it to the dark chasm… he was killed by Undying Slaughter while searching for Jet.

The next time, he fell prey to a horrid creature that resembled an unholy hybrid between a centipede, a scorpion, a human, and a praying mantis. That happened soon after leaving the bone garden.

Then, he managed to reach the chasm once again. Instead of climbing down into its perilous darkness, Sunny tried to fly to the other side by turning into a crow. Halfway across, he heard a quiet rustle, and something dove at him from above. The next moment, he was back on the deck of the Chain Breaker again.

During the attempt after that, he was caught by the enormous abomination that Devouring Beast had consumed near the tower in one of the previous revolutions… dissolving in the viscous acid, Sunny only managed to growl a hoarse curse. Then, his words were replaced by agonized screams.

Back on the Chain Breaker, Sunny grabbed the railing and lowered his head. His expression was dim.

'Ah…'

This island was starting to get on his nerves.

While Nephis and Cassie were talking about the Guiding Light, he stood still, trying to throw the ghastly memories of his latest death out of his mind. Even though Sunny was not a stranger to pain, and even dying, it was not that easy to do.

Suddenly, he was not sure that his previous boasts were substantiated. A few years of this? The Sin of Solace might have been closer to the truth…

Shaking his head, Sunny sighed and looked at his companions. After hesitating for a while, he still convinced them to hide and wait for his return.

He was confident in his ability to bring Jet to the Chain Breaker, at least. Sunny knew where exactly she would be at what time, by now. He also knew where approximately Undying Slaughter would be… it

was not too hard to time his actions correctly.

'I only have one day…'

Timing was not an issue just yet, but he would need to find the fastest and most efficient way of going through the motions of escaping Wind Flower eventually. For now, Sunny still needed to observe, discover, and memorize more details.

But… he was getting tired.

'If we don't manage to flee this hell soon, I'll have to start seriously considering my mental wellness.'

It was funny to even think about mental wellness, considering where he was and what was happening to him, but it was a serious issue. Sunny had to care for his mind. Right now, he was enduring blow after blow without giving himself time to rest and recover. Eventually, he would have to slow down and give himself a chance to catch his breath.

In order to last longer before going insane.

'Not yet, though.'

Sunny found Jet and whisked her away before Undying Slaughter had a chance to catch up to her past self. Returning to the Chain Breaker, he gave his usual speech and departed once again in search of Effie.

He reached the bone garden and turned inland. He avoided the horrid mantis. He gave the slip to the giant octopus-like monstrosity, and even escaped from Devouring Beast without being noticed. Riding past the lonesome tower, he dove back into the misty forest and successfully avoided being killed by the Nightmare Creatures waiting for him there.

Eventually, Sunny reached the chasm again.

Hiding beneath a tree, he looked somberly at the mist above. He still had no idea what kind of flying horror killed him the last time he tried to cross the chasm… the creature had never attacked him in the forest, but since there was nothing to hide him while traversing the

chasm by air, the risk was too great.

Climbing down again was also a bad idea. The legion of black millipedes hiding at the bottom of the deep canyon was too dreadful of a foe… knowing what to expect, Sunny might be able to escape from them. But then again, he might also be either eaten or chased into the caves.

'Well, they can all go to hell.'

Summoning Morgan's Warbow, he wrapped one of his shadows around the arrow and sent it flying across the chasm. The arrow pierced the mist, as fast as lightning, and sank into the trunk of a tall pine tree on the other side.

…Actually, it cut a few of those trees down, and only stopped after piercing the fourth or fifth one.

The shadow glided down the trunk and reached the ground. Dismissing Nightmare, Sunny used Shadow Step and appeared on the other side of the chasm, unharmed.

'There. Eat that, bastards.'

It was not the strongest creature that survived, but the most adaptable. And although Sunny was not that strong among the prisoners of Wind Flower… he was nothing if not resourceful.

Grinning darkly, he summoned Nightmare and jumped into the saddle.

Did it only seem that way, or had the radiance of the Guiding Light became a little brighter?

'Stay alive, Effie...'

Chapter-1420: Unexpected Complications

On the far side of the island, the misty forest was less thick. The trees stood further apart from each other, and were not as tall as in the other areas. The ground, however, was more rocky and uneven. It rose and fell, forming steep hills and deep ravines — not that it mattered.

Usually, terrain like that would make it hard to see a potential enemy in advance, increasing the risk of walking into an ambush…

But with the damned fog veiling everything around, why did it matter? Every kind of terrain was just as bad here.

Sunny still commanded Nightmare to slow down, afraid to encounter another chasm and plummet down without ever having a chance to stop. Flying through a thick forest at breakneck speed was already thrilling enough, and he really didn't want to fall into a nest of monstrous millipedes due to the lack of caution.

Riding the black steed through the mist, Sunny held the Guiding Light high and followed its shine.

His breathing was heavy.

Just a few minutes ago, he had fought a Corrupted Monster and killed it. The creature had almost sent him into the next revolution — it was not particularly strong, as far as Corrupted abominations went, but rather insidious.

Its camouflage was good enough to make Sunny unaware of the imminent attack right until the moment thick roots sprouted from beneath the ground, and a rotten tree that he had been riding past suddenly moved to envelop him with creaking branches.

If not for Shadow Step, Sunny might have been caught, swallowed, and digested by the creature without being able to put up any resistance. Since he managed to escape its grasp, though, a short and violent clash followed.

The abomination looked like a monstrous tree and was as resilient as a tree. It had no organs to destroy and no blood to spill. Even after cutting it down, Sunny had to summon the Cruel Sight and burn it with divine flame — only when all the branches, the rotten trunk, and the roots of the monster had turned to ash did the Spell announce a kill.

Slaying that thing had been a lot of work… but Sunny was still satisfied with the result. At least he learned that there were normal Nightmare Creatures on Wind Flower. If he had to face another Great abomination, his patience would have run thin.

'I feel like I'm not far from the edge of the island, now.'

If so, Effie couldn't be too far away.

Unless she was not on Wind Flower…

Frowning, Sunny jumped to the ground, allowed Nightmare to turn into a shadow, and continued forward on foot.

Now that he was so close, his heart was heavy. Dark thoughts creeped into his mind.

What if he finds Effie… only to discover that he was too late? What if what he finds is her mangled body?

Sunny was not sure that he would be able to endure something like that. At least not without something inside him breaking.

Cresting another hill, he spent some time searching for a way down, and then slid down the wet moss. At the foot of the hill, he used a pile of rocks to stop himself, sending a few of them flying. Then, Sunny looked up.

It was then that he noticed a vague shape in the mist…

And it seemed to notice him.

Almost before Sunny could react, something shot in his direction with astonishing speed. Cursing, he barely dodged the flying object. It hit the slope of the hill behind him, pierced the thin layer of soil, and struck the bedrock beneath.

The impact was so severe that it produced an explosive shockwave. A moment later, pieces of rock, dirt, and moss rained on him like hail. Sunny was already moving to attack... but then froze.

The thing that had flown past him was now embedded deeply into stone, trembling.

It was a strange-looking spear with a shaft of grey wood and a long spearhead of deep crimson color.

Since its passage had torn the veil of mist, he looked forward and saw the vague figure clearly.

In the next moment...

His eyes widened.

"Ef—Effie?! What the hell?! You almost killed me!"

She stared at him in shock, too.

"Doofus?! What the… why on… how are you here?!"

Indeed, it was Ascended Raised by Wolves, huntress Athena.

She looked a bit more tan and wild than usual, covered in dirt and scratches, but there was no mistake. The dewy olive skin, the perfectly sculpted, lean muscles, the tall and beautiful figure, the long brown hair…

Effie was not clad in her Transcendent armor, instead wearing a crude garment made out of something that looked like shark skin.

And there was something different about her…

Gradually lowering his gaze, Sunny answered:

"How else? I came on… on a… ship…"

He stuttered and grew silent.

His mind was momentarily blank.

'Huh?'

There was indeed something different about Effie. Her entire build was different… or rather, certain parts of it. Her already generous figure had become even more outstanding, but much more glaringly than that… her belly was round and protruding forward, so much so that she was supporting it with a hand.

'Just... just how much did she eat? Gods, that gluttonous… gluttonous… woman…'

Sunny's mind was refusing to work properly.

No… the reason for why Effie's belly looked so large had nothing to do with eating too much food.

But it couldn't be...

Suddenly, he remembered a small remark that Jet had made while describing their lives as river nomads:

'Oh… and we fought plenty of Nightmare Creatures. Well, I did, at least.'

He had not paid it attention before, but now, it seemed strange. Why would Jet say that she was the only one who had fought a lot of abominations?

Staring at Effie's round belly, Sunny finally realized why.

By then, his eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Effie! Why… why are you pregnant?!"

She stared at him in bewilderment, then glanced down and suddenly

flinched.

"What?! When did this happen?!"

Effie's voice sounded frightened and shocked.

Then, she gave him a mischievous glance and suddenly burst with laughter.

When her bright laughter died down, Effie coughed and looked at Sunny with a sheepish smile.

"Sorry. It was a joke. Why am I pregnant? Well... how do I explain... you see, Sunny, when a man and a woman love each other very much..."

Chapter-1421: Joy of Life

Sunny was so dumbfounded that he found himself listening passively as Effie gave him the talk about the birds and the bees, her face absolutely straight. In the middle of it, he was suddenly shaken awake and pointed an accusing finger at her.

"No! That's not… I mean… I know how this stuff works, damn it! What I mean is how? Since when? Who's the father?!"

Effie stopped talking and looked at him with a grin. Then, supporting her belly with one hand, she wobbled past him and pulled her spear out of the stone. Leaning on it, she sighed and shrugged.

"I think we already ascertained how. As for since when… should be since five months ago? Somewhere around that."

She patted him on the shoulder and added:

"Oh, and I'm glad to see you too."

Sunny froze for a few moments.

Five months? Thirteen had already passed since the start of the Nightmare, but for Effie, it had been only two. Which meant… which meant that she had already been pregnant during their journey through the white desert, the battle of the Black Skull, and most of her time in Antarctica.

But not all of her time in Antarctica.

Suddenly, he slapped himself on the forehead.

'I'm… I'm such an idiot!'

A flood of memories surfaced in his mind. All the signs had been there. He should have noticed it much sooner!

Back when the cohort traveled across the Chained Island, Effie had been acting strange. Her appetite had been unstable, and her choice of snacks had been odd… which would have been normal for any other person, but not for the gluttonous huntress!

He had even teased her for suffering from motion sickness aboard the Chain Breaker. In hindsight, that sickness had nothing to do with the motions of the flying vessel at all.

There were other hints, as well… like Effie hesitating for a while before refusing Beastmaster's offer to take her back to the waking world and leave the rest of the cohort behind.

If Sunny had been more attentive, he would have realized that the Effie he knew would not have needed any time to think. She had lingered with the answer because she had been considering not just her fate, but also that of her unborn child…

'Ah! A child! Just thinking this word is weird!'

He covered his face with a hand for a moment, then forced out a few words:

"Yeah… I'm glad to see you as well. Of course."

His mind was still in turmoil. Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then added weakly:

"So… I am going to be Uncle Sunny soon?"

Hearing him say that, Effie grinned.

Her voice was warm:

"I think you mean Uncle Doofus."

But her words were not!

Sunny stared at her in outrage.

"What Uncle Doofus! Don't you dare corrupt my precious nephew... or niece... with your nonsense!"

There was so much they needed to discuss… like how Jet was already safe, and how to get back to the Chain Breaker, the dangers of Wind Flower, the time loop…

But Sunny was still stuck on Effie… Effie, the famed huntress Raised by Wolves… being with child.

How had it even happened?

'I mean, I know how… and she's a perfectly healthy young woman… stupidly attractive, too… but still? Still!'

He stared at her, then suddenly frowned.

"Wait… which bastard knocked you up? Do I need to beat him up?"

His eyes widened again.

"Wait… do I need to beat Kai up?!"

Effie remained silent for a few moments, then laughed.

"Gods, Sunny. Relax… Kai is not the father."

Sunny did, indeed, relax a little.

He felt a strange mix of relief and disappointment, both emotions glaringly irrational.

'What the hell. Did I want Kai to be the father?'

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Sunny lingered for a bit, then asked with in exhaustion:

"So who is?"

She smiled.

"If you must know, he's just someone I got to know in Antarctica. A very nice guy, from the Evacuation Army. We met by accident, and, well… one thing led to another. You know — war, adrenaline, the exhilaration of having survived another day, the fear of impending death… all these things make one want to feel alive. As alive as

possible."

Effie had always been a physical person, and one that rejoiced in her physicality — precisely because it had been denied to her prior to becoming a Sleeper. Chained to a wheelchair, she had been a prisoner of her own body for most of her life. So, she exulted in being healthy and able ever since the Spell had given her a chance.

So, Sunny could see how Effie would have let passion take over in the middle of a disastrous war.

Still…

He shook his head.

"What's his name?"

She suddenly coughed.

Sunny's frown deepened.

"What's with that reaction?"

Effie hesitated for a moment, then looked away.

"Uh… that… I don't know."

Sunny stared at her, scandalized.

"Effie!"

His voice was full of disbelief and astonishment.

She raised her hand defensively, a rare look of embarrassment appearing on her face.

"Hey! It's not what you think! I know this guy very well! He is really a nice and upstanding guy… he's a local of Antarctica, but went through the campaign in the Antarctic Center with the First Evacuation Army. He was wounded in Falcon Scott and shipped east with the other injured soldiers during the last round of evacuations.

That's how we met, actually… I was visiting one of my wounded

subordinates in the hospital, and he was being discharged…"

Sunny felt a little relieved. At least she actually seemed to like the basta… the guy. And he was from the First Evacuation Army. Sunny might have even met him...

"So how come you don't know his name, then?"

Effie coughed again.

"That… uh… that's his Flaw, actually. He is… he was a Sleeper, back then. By now, he must have already Awakened."

Her face suddenly fell, and after a short pause, she added quietly:

"...Or died. I don't know."

Sunny was suddenly speechless.

'A Sleeper… from the Antarctic Center… whose Flaw is that his name can't be remembered?'

So the bastard who kno… the father of Effie's child was the young soldier who had been infected with the Nightmare Spell in Sunny's refugee convoy?

So he had delivered the scoundrel to her doorstep with his own two hands?!

Sunny was happy to hear that the nameless Sleeper had been evacuated from Falcon Scott and survived, actually. But at the same time…

'I am definitely beating him up once I'm back!'

Sunny was preoccupied with his own emotions, but noticing Effie's forlorn expression, he pushed them down and took a deep breath.

They had entered the Nightmare not long before the winter solstice. So, by now, the nameless Sleeper was indeed either an Awakened… or dead. Much more likely dead, considering the state they had left Antarctica in.

But that was not what she would want to hear.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then forced out a smile.

"Oh… that guy? Bah! I know him. Don't worry too much — he's not that easily killed. I'm willing to bet that he's perfectly fine, even. We traveled three thousand kilometers together, after all… and I personally gave him literally hundreds of soul shards to saturate his core.

One could even say that I practically raised him! Will a Sleeper I raised go and die without asking my permission? No, he would be too afraid..."

Effie looked at him for a while. Slowly, the sad expression disappeared from her face, and a faint smile appeared on it instead.

Noticing that smile, Sunny frowned.

"What? I know that you're thinking about something inappropriate again… cut it out."

She shook her head and giggled.

"No, no. I was just thinking... since you say that you raised him… it should be Grandpa Doofus, then, not Uncle. Right?"

Sunny blinked.

His expression froze.

His heart skipped a beat.

"...What Grandpa Doofus?! Like hell! Take it back!"

'This evil woman!'

Chapter-1422: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless and his Valiant Companions in the Evil Pyramid of Ancient Dread, Abridged (Volume VI)

After the initial shock of their meeting subsided, Sunny and Effie slowly headed deeper inland. Sunny was retracing his steps, while Effie had never been this far into the misty forest before — most of her time on Wind Flower had been spent hiding from a ferocious Nightmare Creature that dwelled on the shore.

She had ventured out in search of Jet eventually, but found Sunny instead.

He was still reeling from the fact that the vivacious huntress was with child… and that the father was a Sleeper who had once been under his command. That was a lot to digest and come to terms with.

It also changed a lot…

'No wonder Jet said that she was the only one who killed plenty of enemies.'

Effie still possessed her strength and resilience, and Sunny was still benefiting from being augmented by her Ascended Ability… but the huntress was in no state to fight. Her condition not only made her slower and less agile, but was also too delicate for the kind of

physical strain a battle entailed.

What battle? She couldn't even ride Nightmare, so they had to walk at a painfully slow pace.

'That's a problem.'

Now that Effie was with him, Sunny could not cross the chasm in the same manner he had done it the first time… which meant that they would have to go around it. Added to their already lacking speed, the chance of making it to the other side of the island before the revolution ended was low.

He could not run from the Nightmare Creatures inhabiting the forest, either — it had been possible when Sunny was free to use Shadow Step, but the only person who could accompany him into the embrace of shadows was Nephis. With Effie, he had to stay grounded in his tangible form.

Suddenly, the misty expanse of the hellish island seemed infinitely vaster and more dreadful than before.

However, Sunny kept these thoughts to himself.

"...so, we spent a nice, relaxing month drifting downstream on the corpse of a Great Monster while it was being slowly devoured by a swarm of horrid abominations. Sounds ghastly, I know, but it was actually sort of peaceful. Well… anyway, in the end, I had to turn into a colossal sea serpent and kill another, even more colossal sea serpent. He turned out to be the former king of Twilight…"

Effie stared at him silently.

"...but that Dusk, whom I had killed before, turned out to be… Cassie! That's right, she has been living the sweet life in a beautiful palace all that time. Talk about being lucky, huh? So, we repaired the ship in Fallen Grace and sailed to kill a different sybil. That one, I had not killed before. She was a Corrupted Tyrant, too, but Cassie went and finished her off in one strike.

What the hell, I felt so embarrassed… it would have probably taken me at least one-and-a-half strikes, you know?"

The huntress took a deep breath.

"...so, congratulations! Now you know that you have an evil twin from the future. And your Transformation Ability is to become really tall. As if you aren't tall enough already! Right, Jet's evil twin is also here, and she's even less pleasant. If it wasn't for the time loop, I would have been dead because of her."

Sunny paused for a few moments, then nodded.

"Yeah. I think that covers right about everything."

Looking at Effie, he noticed that her expression was blank.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… did I not explain about the time loop well enough? I know, it's weird."

The huntress slowly shook her head.

"No. I get it. But, Sunny… do you mean to say…"

Her eyes were suddenly flashed with annoyance.

"...That I've been pregnant for more than a year?!"

'Huh?'

Now, it was his turn to have a blank expression.

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

"Everything I said, and that's your only question?!"

Effie shook her head furiously.

"No, but you don't understand! Do you think being pregnant is fun?! Do you think it feels great?! Nine months is already bad enough, but it has already been more than a year, and I'm barely half-done!"

She rubbed her back with an aggrieved expression and pierced him with an angry look.

Sunny blinked.

"What are you getting angry at me for? It's not my fault! Plus, it has only technically been that long. From your perspective, those additional months do not even count!"

Effie opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"That's even worse!"

Then, she stopped, leaned on her spear, and let out a long sigh.

"...I'm hungry."

Sunny was stunned. He was perplexed.

'Women!'

Shaking his head, he summoned the Covetous Coffer and produced some food from it. Effie's eyes glinted when she saw fruit, bread, and cheese. Grabbing a handful of grapes, she sent them into her mouth.

"Oh. Oh, gods! This is it! You can't imagine… how sick I was of seaweed and fish meat… well, abomination meat…"

Sunny watched her eat silently. It seemed that Effie's already impossible hunger had become twice as dire, now… even though there was a lot of food stored in the Coffer, it was disappearing with a frightening speed.

He had summoned Saint and Fiend soon after realizing that escaping the abominations was not an option anymore, so they were standing guard around them, joined by Nightmare.

After a while, Sunny offered Effie the Endless Spring and hesitated for a few moments.

Eventually, he said:

"It must have been hard. To survive the Great River like that — unable to fight… or even protect yourself well, really. Both yourself and the… the child."

The huntress looked at him for a few moments, then shrugged with a smile.

"Yeah, sure, it wasn't easy. But Jet took good care of me."

He lingered for a bit.

"So why did you do it?"

Effie raised an eyebrow.

"Did what?"

Sunny's voice was somber and serious:

"Why did you come to the Nightmare with us instead of escaping with Beastmaster?"

Her expression froze.

"Oh…"

Effie did not answer for a while. Then, she looked down and caressed her protruding belly with a distant smile.

After a few moments of silence, she said in a subdued tone:

"Just, you know… the world is already falling apart at the seams. So, I thought, in a place like that… would this kid want to also be raised by a mother who abandons her friends? And the answer... was no."

Looking up, she put on a fake grin and shrugged.

"At least that's what I reckoned."

Sunny studied her face for a few moments, then looked away and nodded.

Then, he smiled crookedly.

"I see. So… you challenged the Third Nightmare to set an example for your child. Okay. Alright. Are you crazy?! What kind of example is that?!"

Effie laughed.

When she answered, her voice was soft:

"A stupid one?"

…In the end, they did not make it to the Chain Breaker in time. Sunny managed to keep Effie safe, but the revolution ended before they even reached the tower.

Coming to his senses on the familiar deck, Sunny looked into the mist and exhaled slowly.

'A stupid example, huh?'

Professor Obel might have been right...

Humanity needed a little stupidity to survive.

Tiredly closing his eyes, he lowered his head and sighed.

'This… is going to be a very, very long day.'

Chapter-1423: Lines in the Sand

'Today… I am not going to die.'

Sitting on the white sand, Sunny was staring at the crude map drawn in front of him. On it was Wind Flower — everything he had learned about the misty island, at least.

The hidden bay where the Chain Breaker had crashed served as the southernmost point. To its east were the bone orchard and the Hollow Butterfly. To its west were the hunting grounds of the Rotting Leopard. Undying Slaughter was straight ahead, to the north, and behind her was the Seeker's Tower.

There were many more marks in the sand, of course. Sunny had marked the location of every Nightmare Creature he knew of — and there were plenty, many of whom had killed him at least once — as well as all the landmarks he had discovered.

The millipede chasm separating the far side of the island, the abandoned port where the harrowing Vine Terror dwelled, the overgrown shrine that was like a nightmare within a nightmare, the inescapable lake which had turned red because of the gargantuan carcass floating in it, the deathly ring of black obelisks…

There were all kinds of ways to die on Wind Flower.

He briefly wondered if there had ever been a map that cost its creator so much suffering.

'The worst part is that it's nearly useless.'

One map was not enough to help him navigate the island. The Nightmare Creatures populating the fog did not stay in place, making his attempts to mark their locations pointless. Devouring Beast especially had a way of appearing in the most unexpected places due

to her speed. The indescribable being that hid in the mist above the island was unpredictable, as well.

So, what he had to do was to not only map every powerful abomination imprisoned on Wind Flower, but also map their movements. The drawing in the sand was only the starting point — Sunny had to mentally construct dozens more, each slightly different.

Only then would he get a clear picture of where the most terrible Nightmare Creatures were at each moment of the loop, and know how to avoid them. That, in turn, would allow Sunny to chart the fastest path to Effie and back.

The problem was that tracking the abominations was not easy. If anything, it was absolutely lethal. And Sunny did not just have to find each of the horrors once… he had to find them repeatedly at different times, all the while evading the rest of the deadly creatures.

He had just started on the task, but was already feeling utterly spent. The mental fatigue that had accumulated in the process of exploring the island was finally becoming unbearable. Sunny couldn't even think straight… drawing multiple imaginary maps was out of the question.

'Ah… I'm tired…'

He rubbed his face, feeling rather strange. His body was full of vigor and energy, but his feverish mind longed for sleep.

"Keep this up, and you'll really become the Mad Prince. Well… mad, at least. Gods know no one in their right mind would call a hideous worm like you a prince."

Sunny turned his head slightly and stared at the Sin of Solace. He was too exhausted to even get angry.

"...Who are you calling hideous? We look exactly the same, idiot."

Shaking his head, he turned back to the map.

At that point, someone's shadow fell on him. Looking up, Sunny saw Nephis… he was startled a little.

'I guess I'm really out of it.'

Not only had Sunny missed the movements of shadows, he had not even noticed the quiet ringing of her silver anklets.

"This is a map of the island?"

Cassie and Jet were not far behind her.

In the recent few revolutions, Sunny had worked a lot on shortening the time it took to rescue Soul Reaper and bring everyone up to speed. Now, it barely took him twenty minutes.

Well… his companions were still full of questions, but he could tackle them gradually. Sunny had also discarded the habit of moving alone, at least for now, and was currently trying to involve the members of the cohort in challenging the loop.

He nodded.

"Yeah."

Picking up a stick, Sunny pointed to the southernmost mark on the map.

"This is where we are."

Then, he pointed to a mark almost all the way north.

"This is where Effie is."

Finally, he pointed to a mark near the Chain Breaker, and another one slightly above it.

"And this is where we need to go."

Nephis studied the map for a few moments, deep in thought. Although she remained silent, Jet asked in a hesitant tone:

"Why don't we just beeline it to that glutton?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I've tried many times. But… it's too difficult. There are many Great abominations between here and there. Even worse, Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast are also wandering the forest. These two… they are the most dangerous creatures on this island, by far."

Then, he looked at the map.

"But there is a cave system running below most of Wind Flower. If we can move underground, we might get to Effie in time. So, we are going to the nearest entrance to the caverns… there are Nightmare Creatures below ground too, though, so we'll make a short stop first."

Jet stared at the map for a few moments, then nodded.

With nothing else to discuss, they left the Chain Breaker behind and set out east, heading for the bone orchard. Sunny walked just behind Nightmare, staring into the distance with an empty expression. He felt… half-asleep.

Nephis studied his face with a hint of concern. She hesitated for a while, then asked:

"Are you alright?"

Sunny flinched and looked at her in confusion. After a few moments passed in silence, he smiled.

"Sure. Just tired."

Her brow furrowed a little.

"How many of these… revolutions… have you been through, exactly?"

He scratched his head.

"Ah… I don't quite remember, at the moment. About thirty, I think? Yeah, somewhere around that."

Sunny inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled.

"I guess we've been inside this Nightmare for five months, now.

Well… fourteen months, disregarding the time storm. Time flies."

Neph's frown deepened. She stared at him for a while, then looked away.

"Technically, it flows."

While he was considering if that had been a joke, she lingered, and then added in her usual even tone:

"Maybe it's time to take a break. Aren't you treating yourself too ruthlessly?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised. Nephis was someone he would have never expected to say something like that. Wasn't she a person who treated herself most ruthlessly of all? A person who didn't mind burning alive endlessly if it meant reaching her goal.

Looking ahead, he smiled.

"Alright. If you say so, I'll find an opportunity to rest, soon…"

Sunny didn't add that if he was going to take a break, she would have no choice but to take a break with him.

'What shall we do?'

His smile widened, but then slowly grew dim.

…It didn't matter.

She was not going to remember any of it, anyway, as soon as the next revolution came.

Sunny would be the only one who did.

Chapter-1424: Do It Yourself

Eventually, they arrived at the bone orchard. The skeletal remains of the dead horrors towered above them, and the subtle sweet smell emanated by the Hollow Butterfly permeated the flowing fog.

The members of the cohort looked around tensely, unnerved by the eerie scene. Sunny, however, had been to this sprawling graveyard many times. He walked nonchalantly between the bones, his steps hurried.

"Follow me. It's right ahead."

Soon, the Great Monster revealed itself from the mist. Even though Sunny had explained that it was not dangerous, his companions still couldn't help but grip their weapons tighter.

"What… the hell… is that?"

Jet's voice sounded hoarse.

Looking back, Sunny gave her a pale smile.

"Nephis and I call these creatures Dark Butterflies. We've seen another one in action, much further upstream… needless to say, it's a blessing that the one in front of us is Hollow."

The four of them stared up at the gargantuan form of the Great Monster in apprehension. After a few moments of silence, Nephis finally asked:

"So, why are we here, exactly?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"Since it's Hollow, we won't earn anything by killing it — no soul shards, no Memories. But its body is perfectly healthy. And it's a body

of Supreme quality, so… we are here to butcher it."

White sparks ignited in Neph's eyes.

"You want to craft weapons out of its chitin?"

He nodded with a tired smile.

"Yes. A few pikes, I hope. If we succeed… the pikes won't have any enchantments, but they'll still be akin to Supreme weapons. That should be of some help on this damned island."

Sunny stared at the motionless butterfly silently, then sighed.

"Let's get to work, shall we?"

The idea to repurpose the body parts of the helpless Great Monster was not that deranged, provided that one was capable of rending its impregnable carapace. Sunny was by no means an master artisan, but knew more about blacksmithing and crafting than an average Awakened did — mostly due to the Brilliant Emporium.

He was almost certain that they would be able to achieve success, even though it was going to take some time. But wasting some time here was also part of his plan — Neph had yet to replenish enough essence to use her Dormant Ability, which meant that Jet's wounds were still unhealed.

Sunny did not want to enter the caverns before both of those things had happened.

So, they camped in the middle of the bone orchard for a while. Luckily, this place was one of the safest on Wind Flower — perhaps because the Hollow Butterfly's scent scared the other Nightmare Creatures away.

Nephis and Jet simply rested and observed, while Sunny, Cassie, Saint, and Fiend were hard at work.

Their target were the six legs of the Great Monster. Severing them was no easy task, but with the help of the five shadows and the augmentation of the Crown of Dawn, as well as a scattering of useful

utility Memories, the work progressed at a steady pace. Saint and Fiend, with their Transcendent strength, were of great help as well.

By the time Nephis had finally regained enough essence to heal Jet, the lower parts of the Hollow Butterfly's legs were laid out on the ground in front of them. They were still too large to be used as pikes — each at least ten meters in length — so Sunny had to splinter and shave them down some more.

Now that Neph could use her augmenting Ability, everything went much faster.

Eventually, there were six makeshift pikes in front of them, each crafted from chitin of Supreme quality. There was also a bundle of crude javelins, and a pile of long splinters to its side.

Looking at the collections of weapons, Sunny couldn't help but remember the Siege Souvenir — a javelin he had crafted from the remains of a Corrupted abomination, then enchanted and used to kill a Fallen Titan. Sadly, there was no time for him to enchant the ones in a similar manner. One day was too short to create any kind of meaningful spellweave.

Remembering the Siege Souvenir also reminded him of his battle with the Ravenous Fiend. The vengeful creature had used a crude sword fashioned from the tusk of an unknown Nightmare Creature back then…

After thinking for a few moments, Sunny picked up a slightly curved splinter of the Hollow Butterfly's chitin. Its edge was sharp enough to serve as a sword, so he tossed it to Fiend.

He also handed another piece of black chitin, this one flat and roughly circular, to Saint. Sunny had personally made it into a shield before.

"I think we are ready."

As ready as they would be… at least in this revolution.

Each member of the cohort, as well as Saint and Fiend, picked up one of the pikes. The javelins were divided between Sunny, Nephis, and

Jet.

Armed to the teeth, they threw one last glance at the motionless butterfly — which was now laying messily on the ground, serene despite being mutilated and deeply disturbing for that reason — and backed away.

Sunny led the group through the labyrinth of bones, stopping from time to time to ascertain their location. Eventually, they had to climb over the spine of an especially large horror, and found a small space hidden behind it.

There, the ground had been broken by a titanic blow, and a black pit waited for them, full of darkness.

"That's our way down."

It was one of the entrances to the system of underground caverns that Sunny had found.

Using Neph's golden rope, the Evertwine — which had once been earned by Cassie in her First Nightmare — they cautiously descended into the pit. Soon, the members of the cohort found themselves standing on the rough rock floor of a natural cave, surrounded by darkness.

Almost no light reached this deep down, swallowed by the mist above.

However, none of them felt too concerned about it. In fact, they even felt relieved for finally having escaped the everpresent fog — there was none of it underground.

Sunny had not mapped all the caves yet, but he knew the general location of where they had to go.

Carrying the long pike, he took a step into the darkness and sighed.

'I hope we won't die here today… again. No, I know we won't.'

Chapter-1425: Cavern Terror

The caverns were a Corrupted Terror's territory.

A Corrupted Terror… it had not been that long ago that Sunny would have shuddered from a mere thought of fighting a creature like that. He was still apprehensive, of course, but not nearly as much as a wise person would have been.

An abomination of that Rank and Class was not something a lone Master should have the ambition to kill — or a cohort of them, really. Sybil of the Fallen Grace, for example, had not only wiped out the entirety of LO49 and the enormous battleship sent to rescue its personnel, but also almost ended the lives of Sunny, Naeve, and Saint Bloodwave at Falcon Scott.

A Corrupted Terror was a walking disaster of chilling proportions.

…Of course, just like all people were not the same, Nightmare Creatures weren't either. One Terror could be much more dreadful than another, even within the boundaries of a same Rank. How one's Aspect countered the creature's powers, or was countered instead, also played a large role.

Sybil of the Fallen Grace, for example, had been a harrowing being even among Terrors. She had also possessed an especially insidious kind of power — the power to twist minds and subjugate living beings.

The creature hiding in the caverns of Wind Flower was entirely different.

This Terror did not possess powers that allowed it to play with its prey's mind. Neither could it destroy the prey's soul. Instead, it was viciously strong and covered by nearly impervious armor.

Or maybe it was not nearly, but absolutely impervious. At least Sunny had not been able to break it yet.

As for powers…

He wasn't sure, but it seemed like the incredible toughness of the creature's hide was a part of them. Sunny also suspected that the very existence of the underground caverns had something to do with the Terror.

If not for the fact that time on Wind Flower only encompassed a single day, who knew… perhaps, in the near future, the whole forest would have been swallowed by the growing chasm beneath it. He could also imagine entire cities turning into ruin as they collapsed into the maw of devouring earth… continents, perhaps, given enough time.

However, Sunny was not too tense about clashing with the Cavern Terror. There were two reasons why he felt hopeful about the upcoming battle.

Firstly, the creature was clearly out of its element. Not only was it trapped on an island and surrounded by water, with no time to let its dreadful influence spread, but it was also without an army of minions. Things would have been much more dreary if the system of caves was flooded with hundreds, or even thousands, of lesser abominations with similarly tough bodies.

The second reason was Jet. Her ability to ignore all forms of physical defense directly countered the most threatening trait of the powerful Terror. As long as they lived long enough for her to deliver several strikes, they would win.

The long pikes were meant to buy them that time.

As the cohort moved deeper into the caverns, Sunny explained all these points to his companions. Nephis nodded, expressing her approval of the plan.

"It would be wise not to kill it too quickly, though."

He looked at her in surprise.

"Why?"

She silently pointed to Cassie.

"Cassie needs a little time to gain knowledge of its Attributes and powers. Even if we kill this Terror now, we'll still have to face it again in the future revolutions. Her insights are much deeper than what any of us can learn from pure observation, so, with her help, fighting this Terror the next time will be easier."

She paused for a moment, and then added evenly:

"In fact, in your place, I would have brought Cassie with me everywhere. To learn about every abomination on this island from her."

Sunny stared at Nephis for a while, then turned to Cassie.

'Actually, she's right.'

He had been dying over and over again, slowly learning more about the dreadful prisoners of Wind Flower with each death. Bringing Cassie along would have sped up the process dramatically, and even allowed him to learn things he would have never learned otherwise… and yet, he had not.

Because it meant that Cassie would die over and over again, too.

And while Sunny shuddered at the thought of being cruelly killed, watching his companions die was so much worse.

…Watching Cassie die was especially hard. Maybe because, despite the fact that the delicate blind girl had proven her strength over and over again, she was still the weakest of them. And he... deep down inside, he still saw her as someone who needed his protection.

Cassie was quiet and unassuming, so it was not easy to keep her martial prowess in mind.

Sunny sighed and lowered his head.

'I'll have to involve her, regardless. My progress is too slow.'

At that moment, they entered another large cavern. The darkness here seemed especially deep and oppressive, barely retreating from the light of their luminous Memories.

He suddenly sensed the shadows moving ominously behind the thick rock wall.

Looking up sharply, Sunny lowered his pike and shouted:

"Right side! Prepare!"

In the next moment…

The wall of the cavern to their right suddenly exploded, several tons of broken stone flying at them like an artillery shells. Sunny barely had time to dodge a slab of black rock when a massive shape revealed itself from the cloud of dust, already descending upon them.

'Curses!'

The Terror resembled a giant, monstrous termite. Sunny could only see its massive head and an opened maw, with saw-like mandibles protruding repulsively from its edges. Its head alone was almost as wide as the entire cavern, and it was flying at them with dreadful speed.

The dark chasm of the creature's maw was like a cave itself.

Sunny had perished painfully inside its darkness once or twice, so he knew that there was no escape from it.

His eyes glinted furiously.

'Not this time, damn it!'

But at the same time, another, exhausted part of his mind thought:

'Ah… so what if I die again? I'm so tired…'

Chapter-1426: Pathfinder

Before the Terror could swallow them all, Nephis appeared in its way. Her pike was already pressed against the uneven floor of the cavern, supported by her foot, the sharp tip pointed at the approaching monstrosity. Her eyes were calm and full of resolve.

A moment later, Saint was by her side.

Sunny, Cassie, and Fiend were not far behind.

'Will it work?'

Before Sunny could even finish the thought, the Terror plunged into the row of pikes.

There was a deafening sound, and he felt a terrible force wrenching his arms. If not for Bone Weave, his bones would have probably snapped and shattered into a thousand fragments.

'Ah…'

Sunny had already increased his weight as much as he could, turning into an immovable monolith. Still, he was thrown back. Cassie had been flung back, as well — the blind girl twisted in the air and nimbly landed on her feet.

One of the pikes actually broke despite the Supreme material it had been made of, forcing Fiend to stagger back with a dumbfounded expression.

However, Nephis and Saint somehow withstood the terrible impact. More importantly, the charge of the Terror had been stopped, at least temporarily. The creature had only partially emerged from behind the broke wall, most of its revolting body still hidden from view.

Neph's Pike had become stuck between two of its mandibles, while the one held by Saint was pushed against the black, glossy membrane of its eye.

And yet, there was still not even a crack on the impregnable chitin.

'Damn it…'

Even weapons crafted from Supreme material were not able to break through the Terror's armor, it seemed.

However, most of them had not shattered from the impact, and the cohort was momentarily a safe distance away from the trembling mandibles. The pikes were doing their job.

Rushing forward, Sunny put his whole weight into his own, joining Nephis and Saint. At the same time, he called upon the shadows. Tenebrous chains rose from the floor of the cavern and fell from its ceiling, wrapping around the Terror to immobilize it.

The Terror snapped its mandibles, trying to break the pikes. Its massive body moved, making the black chains groan.

"Jet!"

Right at that moment, a black steed leaped over their heads. Landing on the back of the giant creature, it rushed forward — its rider had already slid out of the saddle, the long pike held in her hands disappearing into the depths of the Terror's body.

The abominations shuddered and let out a terrifying, ear-piercing shriek.

The chains holding it down snapped, and the giant insect-like horror tried to throw Jet off its back. But at that time, Neph's eyes suddenly shone, and the soft radiance of her skin was extinguished. At the same time, her pike suddenly ignited with incandescent light.

Noticing it, Sunny sent the shadow that had been augmenting her body onto the pike, as well.

The crude weapon finally managed to break through the enemy's

armor, cracking it slightly. The damage done to the Terror was not too serious, but it momentarily pinned it in place.

That moment gave Jet enough time to catch the pike that Cassie had tossed into the air before Nightmare even landed on the creature's back. Soul Reaper did not waste any time, dashing forward and delivering another vicious strike.

The creature shuddered once again. Visibly weakened and tormented by harrowing pain, it continued trying to resist… but it was already pointless.

Staring at the Terror, Sunny remembered his first meeting with Undying Slaughter and smiled spitefully. He knew better than anyone what the bastard was feeling right now.

"Kill it!"

…Before too long, the battle was over.

They actually managed to slay a Corrupted Terror without losing a single member of the cohort. The dreadful creature was dead.

'What... the hell... it's so much easier when I'm not alone...'

Sunny winced and shook his head, perplexed by his own thoughts.

'What am I thinking? Of course it is, you fool...'

He was sitting on the floor, catching his breath. Nephis was massaging her forearms with a small grimace. Cassie had retrieved the Guiding Light from the sling on her back and was now leaning on it heavily.

Jet had just jumped down from the dead Terror's massive carcass. There was an amused smile on her face.

"What would you know… I received a Memory."

Sunny smiled weakly.

"Congratulations."

He had earned a few Memories himself inside the loop, as well as a fair number of fragments. Sadly, none of them remained. At the start of each revolution, the fragments were erased, and the Memories disappeared as if they had never existed.

The world was returned to its previous state, with no exceptions.

…Apart from the Sin of Solace, and the wear and tear accumulating on both his mind and his soul.

Jet stared at the giant corpse doubtfully, and then asked:

"Should we dig out the soul shards?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No point."

The carcass was too large. Retrieving the shards would take too long, and their benefits would be gone at the start of the next revolution, anyway.

He let out a sigh and stood up.

"We should continue moving. There should be no more abominations until we leave the caves… at least on the route I chose. Once we reach the chasm, though, it's going to be a little rough. There are these millipedes, you see…"

Nephis, Cassie, and Jet listened to his description, their faces slowly turning a little green.

Nevertheless, they followed him without voicing any objections.

Getting out of the chasm had indeed turned out a little rough. Cassie had to sacrifice one of her Echoes to buy them enough time, and even then, everyone ended up thoroughly wounded.

The smell of blood attracted a few Nightmare Creatures in the forest, as well. Luckily, Sunny knew which paths to take, so the combined strength of the cohort was enough to fend them off.

…But they wasted too much time.

It was already too late to try and return to the Chain Breaker by the time they reached the northern edges of the island.

Walking through the mist, Sunny suddenly raised a hand, signaling the others to stop.

Then, he shouted:

"Effie! It's me, Sunny! Don't throw your spea…"

In the next moment, he cursed and hurriedly dodged to the side. A grey spear flashed passed him and hit Saint's shield with a loud crack.

The graceful knight was pushed back several steps.

"Goddammit! Every time! Every damned time!"

Sunny raised himself from the ground and looked into the mist with a resentful expression. There, Effie stood, supporting her belly and looking at him with wide eyes.

"Doofus?"

She turned her head slightly, finally noticing the rest of her cohort. Bright joy flashed in her eyes.

Jet secretly let out a sigh of profound relief.

"Damned glutton… I knew you'd be alright…"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then tilted her head slightly.

…Nephis, however, was frozen in place.

Her eyes were strangely wide.

"Effie? Why… are you… why are you…"

The huntress looked at her in confusion, then glanced at her belly and grinned.

"Oh... I guess you wouldn't know. You see, Princess... when a man and a woman love each other very much…"

As she continued talking with a sincere expression, Neph's bewildered face slowly turned pink.

Looking at her, Sunny felt delightfully vindicated.

Chapter-1427: Unexplored Opportunities

There was no point in trying to get back to the Chain Breaker. The cohort had spent too much time traveling to the far side of the island, and there was not enough of it left.

Which was not to say that this revolution was useless.

Sunny had learned how to craft weapons from the Hollow Butterfly. Next time, he would be able to do it faster. He had also learned how to kill the Cavern Terror… next time, he would be able to kill better. The same went for the several abominations they had fought in the misty forest.

Especially due to the fact that Cassie had told him more about the nature and powers of those creatures. Some of the things he had already deduced, but others were a complete revelation.

Every revolution brought Sunny closer to the goal. At least…

At least he hoped so.

Currently, the members of the cohort were resting not far from the spot where they had found Effie. The huntress was greedily devouring the provisions from the Covetous Coffer, while Jet was trying to explain the nature of the time loop to her. Nephis still seemed a little dazed after learning of Effie's condition, and Cassie had silently merged into the background, like she always did.

It was easy to forget that she was even here.

Sunny, meanwhile, sat a little distance away, staring into the mist.

'Actually, it's a bit awkward.'

His thoughts were somber.

Despite how much he tried to not let the nature of time on Wind Flower affect his mindset, he was still growing more and more reliant on the time loop. For him, this revolution was as good as done — they were not going to make it back in time, so there was no point in trying. Mentally, Sunny was already considering what to do next time.

However, the situation was entirely different for his companions.

For them, there was no next time. Even if they knew that time would repeat itself, it was not the kind of thing one could really make peace with. So, they must be feeling both strange and desperate about this sudden inaction.

'There's time to do something, I guess.'

Sunny closed his eyes tiredly.

The overgrown shrine was not too far from here. So was the blood lake. It was not impossible to reach the obelisk ring, either… he had not thoroughly explored any of these places yet, and they could make an attempt.

Of course, the reason for why Sunny had not been able to study these areas was because they were too deadly. He would make some progress if he took the cohort there, but only at the cost of their lives.

Sunny had started this revolution with a promise to stay alive, so he was in no mood for dying, or watching his companions die.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

'Well, there's a couple safer things I've yet to try.'

Since Sunny was currently in the information-gathering phase of his vague plan to escape Wind Flower, there were plenty of options he had yet to explore.

He summoned a Memory. Soon, an ominous mirror encased in dark silver appeared in his hand, its surface like a pool of mercury. The

Mirror of Truth…

He had received this Ascended Memory of the Seventh Tier after accidentally slaying the Fallen Titan, Defiled Seeker of Truth. The abomination had practically fallen on his head during the joint battle in East Antarctica, and was killed by him out of pure luck.

Its single enchantment allowed Sunny to gain one power of a being caught in the reflection of the Mirror of Truth, for a period of time. The Memory would be destroyed after that.

It was not hard to realize that this one-use artifact was uniquely suited for Wind Flower. After all, it could be used repeatedly here, once during each revolution. It was strangely fitting, considering that the island had once belonged to one of the Seekers.

Sunny had yet to use it, though. Except for Undying Slaughter and the Devouring Beast, he did not know enough about the prisoners of Wind Flower to do so. And catching a reflection of those two without being killed by them was no easy task.

So, currently, the reflection caught by the Mirror of Truth was that of Nephis — she had picked up the Memory once, back on the Black Island, and her visage still remained caught on the mercurial surface.

'Blindly trying to reflect abominable powers has been a problem before… but if I indeed involve Cassie, it can become feasible.'

This was a whole layer of opportunities he had to think about and explore. The enchantment of the Mirror of Truth was not limited to Nightmare Creatures, either. Sunny could temporarily gain the Aspect Abilities of the cohort members, as well… Neph's flames, Cassie's premonition, Jet's ability to destroy souls, Effie's herculean strength…

His tired mind went into a stupor from the sheer amount of intertwined possibilities.

After a while, Sunny dismissed the Mirror of Truth and took a deep breath.

There was another tool at his disposal that he had not used yet. The fragment of Shadow God's domain that he had received as a reward

for mastering the fourth step of Shadow Dance.

He had not experimented with it before due to the fear of wasting this powerful Legacy Relic. But now that Sunny was inside of the loop… was there a better place to learn what the Domain Fragment could actually do?

He had been considering unleashing it for a while now. What stopped Sunny before was the desire to learn more about Wind Flower first. But he had already explored most of it, at least tentatively. Was there a reason to wait?

Only one…

He was exhausted.

Sunny stared bleakly into the mist.

'The Mirror of Truth and the fragment of Shadow's Domain. I'll try them next.'

But first… he really needed a break. Assessing these two tools would go much better with a fresh mind.

Glancing at the members of the cohort, Sunny hesitated for a few moments, and then asked:

"Do you guys… want me to do anything specific once the next revolution starts?"

When was the last time he had a real day off, free to do anything he wanted... or do nothing at all?

Even in the periods of relative calm, Sunny had always been burdened by the need to accomplish so many things. This time, he wasn't going to bother.

He was just going to... rest.

A hint of excitement suddenly bloomed in his ragged heart.

Chapter-1428: Searching Reflection

Sunny waited for a moment… then waited some more. He was back on the deck of the Chain Breaker, surrounded by flowing mist. A slight tremor ran through his body.

'I'm tired.'

He straightened slowly and stared into the fog. It was time for him to take a break, but… Sunny wasn't even sure what he was supposed to do. His companions were just as useless as far as resting was concerned — none of them had given him a single good idea.

Well… except for Jet. She had looked at him for a few moments, chuckled, and told him to take a good nap.

Which was not a bad piece of advice. As a government officer who had always looked overworked and suffering from sleep deprivation, she would know best.

That said…

Even though this revolution was supposed to be his day off, Sunny still had to rescue Jet. Relaxing while she was being killed by Undying Slaughter did not sound restful at all. He couldn't bring himself to even think about skipping this step.

'Ah…'

Glancing at Nephis and Cassie, Sunny walked over to Nightmare and climbed into the saddle. Neph looked at him questioningly.

"Sunny? What are you doing?"

He couldn't be bothered to explain things properly.

"Leaving. Don't worry, I'll be back soon. Until then… just stay here."

Leaving the two bewildered young women behind, Nightmare leaped into the mist.

As the familiar scenes flew past him, Sunny summoned the Mirror of Truth and studied the reflection of Neph's on its mercurial surface. After hesitating for a few moments, he activated the [Searching Reflection] enchantment.

At the same time, he imagined a pure white flame and thought:

'Soul Flame.'

A small crack appeared on the silver mirror.

Suddenly, Sunny felt very strange. It was as if his soul, which had always been still and silent, was in motion… rolling, billowing. Burning. It was not painful, just unfamiliar.

[Soul Flame] Ability Description: "Your soul burns with the purest of flames. That flame can both restore and destroy, and is both a blessing and a curse."

'How peculiar.'

Sunny had gained Neph's Dormant Ability. It was then that he realized an important detail — possessing something and being in control of it were two different things. He should have expected that much, though. After all, it took him some time to learn how to use his own Aspect.

For the rest of the way, Sunny kept trying to manifest Soul Flame. As he did, more tiny cracks appeared on the surface of the Mirror of Truth. Judging by the rate at which the Memory deteriorated, he could borrow a Dormant Ability for about half a day.

He suspected that an Awakened one would destroy the Memory in a few hours, while an Ascended one would not last for more than one. A Transcendent Ability might shatter the Mirror of Truth in mere

minutes, while anything greater… perhaps just a few moments would be enough.

Still… it was sort of exhilarating.

Eventually, a small black flame appeared on his palm. Sunny stared at it incredulously.

'...It's black?'

He had expected to see the pure white flame, just like what Nephis could summon.

But it made sense. Soulflame was just that… flame produced from one's soul. Neph's soul was pure and incandescent, while his was lightless and dark.

Sunny also felt that his black flame was much, much weaker than hers. It was reasonable, too — although the [Flame of Divinity] and the potency of his Ascended soul fueled it, he lacked Neph's lineage Attribute, [The Fire]. That Attribute granted her unmatched affinity to flame and, among other things, empowered her soul.

Also… Sunny lacked the innate resistance to fire it granted her.

"Ouch!"

He hurriedly dismissed the black flame when the skin on his palm started to blister. It hurt like hell.

Sunny was no stranger to pain, but burning… burning was up there with the absolute worst kinds of it. It was hard to imagine something more terrible.

A deep frown contorted his face.

As Nightmare dashed deeper into the misty forest, Sunny continued concentrating on his newfound Ability. Eventually, he managed to summon soulflame again, this time channeling it into his body instead of manifesting it outside of himself. This time, it did not hurt.

His skin was suddenly suffused with a strange dark radiance.

Concentrating it on his hands, he watched as the blisters on his palm slowly disappeared.

Sunny had just healed himself.

'Wow.'

How nice would it be, to be able to mend his own wounds?

He shook his head.

'Where did Neph get the audacity to call me a cockroach, even?'

If anything, she was the ultimate roach!

He spent a bit more time experimenting with soulflame and eventually managed to get it to empower his body. Augmented both by both the dark flames and the shadows, Sunny felt dire strength coursing through his veins… it was not quite as daunting as when Nephis shared her flame with him, but almost comparable.

One curious detail of this augmentation was that it did not divide itself into five distinct parts, akin to his five shadows. Instead, it was a single mass of flame which could be divided however he wished.

'Huh…'

Sunny imagined being augmented by his five shadows, all of the authentic soulflame, all of the mirrored souflame, Effie's Ascended Ability, and the Crown of Dawn on top of that.

Wouldn't that turn him into an absolute monster?

Yes, it would… sadly, Wind Flower was a place where even a monster like that was close to the bottom of the food chain.

'It's an option worth remembering, though.'

At this point, Sunny could already smell Jet's blood in the air.

Galloping past the familiar trees, he noticed her hunched figure and reached down.

"Grab my hand!"

Jet looked up, her face pale and pained. It took her a moment to recognize his voice, and another one to shake off her shock. Not even understanding the situation completely, she reached forward.

Sunny pulled her up. This time, however, he put Jet in front of him, instead of behind him.

They ended up in quite an awkward pose, his hand pressed against her back and soaked in her blood.

She grimaced.

"Sunny… you… really know how to…"

He interrupted her:

"Make a girl squeal? Yeah. I know. Now, stay still."

His bloodied hand was suddenly suffused with the dark radiance once again. And washed in that radiance… Jet's wounds slowly began to heal.

It was nowhere near as fast and efficient as when Nephis healed people, but it still worked. And since Neph was currently devoid of essence, that was more than enough.

A dark smile appeared on his face.

'That should save me a lot of time in the future…'

No matter how many times the future repeated itself.

Chapter-1429: Bed Time

Soon, Nightmare landed on the deck of the Chain Breaker. Sunny had been a bit distracted, so he was surprised to see that Nephis was pointing her sword at him. After a short moment, she let out a sigh and sheathed it again.

'Right. They didn't see us approaching because of the mist, and then something fast jumped out of it and landed on the ship.'

After the lackluster explanation Sunny had given them, both Cassie and Nephis must have been tense and uneasy for the past half an hour.

"You're back…"

Nephis started to talk, but then grew silent. She had finally noticed the bloodied figure sitting in front of Sunny.

Jet used that moment to gingerly jump down and stretch.

"Horse riding... is just not for me. Ah, I miss my PTV."

Cassie seemed taken aback.

"...Soul Reaper Jet?"

Jet nodded and smiled.

"One and only."

Then, her expression darkened.

"Well… I suppose not anymore."

For a few moments, everyone was silent. Nephis and Cassie were looking between Sunny and Jet, startled. He had already dismounted

and was rubbing his face, a little spaced out.

"Sunny… you have already found Jet?"

He stared at Nephis for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes. I also found Effie. She's on the other side of the island, but we can't go there yet. Oh… Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast are also here. As well as a number of Great Nightmare Creatures. Basically, everywhere you go on this island, only death awaits."

All of it was news for Cassie and Neph, and most of it was news to Jet.

He paused for a moment, ignoring their somber expressions, and nodded.

"Alright. I'm going to sleep. Don't leave the ship."

Sunny headed for the hatch to the interior of the ship, but was stopped by Nephis.

"Wait… if you don't mind. How do you know all this? What happened?"

The corner of his eye twitched.

"Wind Flower exists inside a closed loop of repeating time, and I have already lived through this day a few dozen times. I can remember the previous revolutions because of my cursed sword. The last time around, you told me to rest… so that's what I'm doing. I'm going to take a nap. Now, if you'll excuse me…"

He walked between the three frozen women and disappeared into the hatch.

Finding his way to his sleeping quarters, Sunny dismissed his mantle and toppled onto his bed. His pillow had never felt so soft.

'I'll take a small nap… just a few hours… and then explain everything properly.'

Closing his eyes, he instantly fell into the comforting embrace of sleep.

The next thing Sunny knew…

He was crouching on the deck of the Chain Breaker, just as tired as he had been before. He waited for a moment, then straightened and looked around in confusion.

'What is this?'

Sunny… was back to the start of the loop.

His expression soured.

'What the hell? Did I sleep through the whole day?'

Or had something killed him in his sleep?

Turning around, Sunny frowned and looked at Nephis. She met his gaze and said:

"I'm fine. I can still put up a fight."

He stared at her for a moment, then cursed and jumped into the saddle. Before Nephis or Cassie could say anything, the dark destrier had already disappeared into the mist.

'I just want to sleep in peace. How hard can it be?'

Sunny used the Mirror of Truth again, found Jet, and healed her. Returning to the Chain Breaker, he dismounted first and looked at his tense and startled companions in exasperation.

Before they could say anything, he raised a hand and stopped them.

"Yes, I found Jet. Time loops on this island, so I have already lived through these events a bunch of times. Leaving the ship is too dangerous, so please don't. I am going to sleep… I might seem crazy and rude, but it was actually you who insisted that I take a break. I'll be off, then."

With that, he nodded and used Shadow Step to disappear from the deck.

Three confused women were left in his wake.

Falling on his bed, Sunny closed his eyes and sighed.

'Sleep…'

Then, he was standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker again.

Sunny straightened, took a deep breath, and bellowed:

"Damnation!"

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It took Sunny five more revolutions to finally feel refreshed. Each time, he rescued Jet and went directly to bed, only to find himself standing back on the misty deck not long after.

At least it felt short. In truth, Sunny must have slept until the termination point of the loop each time.

On the eight revolution, finally, he came to his senses feeling… if not well, then at least not bone tired. His mind was clear, and his thoughts flowed freely without being burdened by the weight of accumulated stress.

'I… must have been more exhausted than I thought.'

His recovery speed was already supposed to be incredible thanks to the Shroud of Dusk. Considering that it took him a whole week of doing pretty much nothing but sleeping to recover… Sunny promised himself not to underestimate the strain of reliving the horrors of Wind Flower over and over again anymore.

Luckily, he had paused before his sanity collapsed.

That said, his mental state was still delicate. Giving himself enough time to sleep was one thing… but he also had to go through some kind of positive experiences to counter the destructive effect of dying

repeatedly in all kinds of macabre ways.

'What is supposed to come after getting a good night's sleep?'

Staring into the mist, Sunny pondered for a while, and then smiled.

'Actually, isn't it obvious?'

It was breakfast!

Nodding to himself, he walked past Nephis and Cassie and climbed into the saddle. Both of them looked at him in surprise.

"Sunny? What are you doing?"

He looked down at his companions and lingered for a few moments.

Then, he said:

"I have an idea of where Jet is. I'll go fetch her really quick. Meanwhile, though, I have a strange request…"

Turning to Nephis, he put on his most pleasant smile.

"Neph, it might sound weird… but can you cook up something tasty while I'm gone? Go all out! Use any ingredient you need. It's rather important that you don't hold back."

She simply stared at him, a hint of confusion hiding in her striking grey eyes.

"I… guess I can?"

Sunny grinned.

"Great! Oh! Don't forget to make coffee! Wait, we don't have coffee... tea, then! The best tea we have!"

With that, he commanded Nightmare to leap into the mist.

It was time for him to be pampered a little!

Chapter-1430: The Last Meal

Some time later, Sunny was sitting on his opulent Memory chair in front of a veritable feast of all kinds of delicious food. Better yet, it was all prepared by Nephis… he was drooling from just looking at it.

They were currently at the mess deck of the Chain Breaker. Sunny was sick and tired of the mist, so being away from it was already doing wonders for his mood. Because of the dimness of the outside world, the mess deck was illuminated by the warm light of luminous Memories… the fragrance of his luxurious breakfast permeated the air.

Nephis was staring at him with an serious expression, her confusion hidden so well that no one except for him would have detected it.

"You said that it was important, so… I did my best."

Sunny marveled at how endearing her seriousness was, then nodded and immediately picked up his chopsticks.

'Where to start…'

For a moment, he was lost for choice.

But only for a moment.

Soon, he was happily stuffing his face with several dishes at the same time. His table manners… would make Fiend look like a gentleman, in comparison.

Nephis, Cassie, and Jet stared at him incredulously.

After a while, Jet let out a long sigh and asked:

"Sunny… sorry to interrupt your meal… but aren't you going to explain what is going on?"

He stopped chewing for a moment and glanced at her briefly.

"I might."

Then, he asked sweetly:

"Oh, can anyone pour me a cup of tea?"

The teapot was right there in front of him, but what was the point of being pampered if he had to do everything himself?

Nephis blinked, confused.

"Can't you do it yourself?"

Sunny smiled. Considering that his cheeks had ballooned because of all the food in his mouth, his smile looked nothing short of ridiculous.

"I can."

There were a few moments of awkward silence.

Then, Nephis sighed and poured tea in a beautiful porcelain cup.

"Here you go."

Sunny nodded in gratitude and chased down the food with a sip of the bitter tea.

"Ah… shame there's no coffee anywhere in this tomb…"

He was enjoying his break quite a bit. The other three, however, seemed a little concerned. After a while, Nephis cleared her throat and asked evenly:

"So, are you going to tell us what is going on or not?"

Sunny swallowed, took another sip of tea, and gave her a contemplative look.

"Well, you see. How do I put it... I just wanted you to make me breakfast."

Neph's usually motionless face seemed to twitch a little.

But he was not done talking. His voice turned grave:

"...Because I don't have a lot of time left. I only have a day to live."

She was suddenly pale.

Jet's eyes widened. Cassie flinched.

All three of them knew that Sunny could not lie. Which meant that… he was really going to die.

"What?!"

Sunny nodded solemnly.

"Yes. Sadly, it's true… I am going to die soon. It's inevitable, and none of you can stop it. So, I just wanted to spend a pleasant day with you, guys… gals? Anyway, this breakfast is a good start..."

There was dead silence in the mess deck. Jet was frozen still. Cassie seemed petrified.

Nephis, however, slowly leaned over, raised a hand… and poked his face with a finger.

Her voice trembled a little:

"He… he's not wearing the mask…"

Something fell to the floor with a loud noise.

Sunny rubbed his cheek, blushed a little, and looked at Neph with reproach.

"Right. Now that we're past that… let's get back to food. It's getting cold!"

Saying that, he nonchalantly continued to stuff his face. A satisfied sigh escaped from his lips.

After a few moments, he looked up and saw three beautiful women

staring at him in stunned silence. Their faces were pale.

Sunny sighed and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Cassie did not move. Furious white sparks ignited in the depths of Neph's eyes.

But it was Jet who broke the silence first:

"What do you mean, what?! Do you expect to drop that bomb on us and continue eating as if nothing happened?! What do you mean, you are going to die?! Why?! Who is going to kill you?! How do we prevent it?!"

It was probably the first time Sunny saw the infamous Soul Reaper Jet lose her composure. Well… disregarding the days she was crawling around their raft trying to eat him.

But she had been much calmer even then.

Nephis opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. Eventually, she simply pointed to Jet.

Cassie nodded.

"What Master Jet said!"

Sunny blinked a few times and put a confused expression on his face.

"I mean… yes? Do you expect me to let all this food go to waste? And I mean dying by "going to die". A terrible Nightmare Creature is going to kill me. As for preventing it… ah, there's no point, really. It is what it is."

He reached for his tea and shook his head:

"I don't get it. Why are you guys making a scene?"

He basked in their comical expressions for a few moments, and then exploded with laughter.

"Oh… oh, sorry… damn! I think I am starting to understand Effie better. This is really fun!"

Gulping down the tea, Sunny smiled and looked at his companions with mirth in his eyes. By now, they were thoroughly dumbfounded.

He sighed.

"Listen… I did not tell you before, but this whirlpool is actually a whirlpool of time. Time moves in a circle on this island, meaning this day repeats itself over and over."

They stared at him silently.

"What I mean to say is that all of us have been reliving the same day ever since arriving at Wind Flower. I'm just the only one who remembers the previous ones. I've died a few dozen times already trying to get us out… and I'll definitely die many more times before we finally escape this hellhole."

His teeth gleamed in a cavalier grin.

"What, did you think that dying would actually kill me?"

Since his companions seemed to be having trouble with comprehending the nature of the time loop, Sunny explained it again, this time in detail. He wasn't hurried, and did not forget to thoroughly enjoy Neph's breakfast in the process.

Luckily, Sunny already had rich experience of having this conversation, so he did it again with ease.

His mood was quite good.

When he was done, Nephis, Cassie, and Jet glanced at each other.

After a few moments of silence, Nephis asked:

"So although you are indeed going to die soon, you'll come back to life at the start of the next… revolution? Every time?"

Sunny nodded.

"Exactly!"

She looked down and took a deep breath.

When she spoke again, her voice sounded strange:

"So what you mean to say is that… we can kill you right now, and you'll be fine tomorrow?"

Sunny scratched his head.

"I guess so. Although it's a weird way to put it."

Nephis nodded, as if coming to a decision.

Then, she looked at Cassie and Jet.

"So, we're in agreement? He has to be killed, right?"

Cassie and Jet nodded seriously.

"Yes. Of course."

"Let's not make it quick…"

Sunny blinked, this time out of sincere surprise.

"Uh… what? What do you mean, kill me?"

Jet smiled leisurely as she slowly rose to her feet.

"Why are you making a scene? We'll just kill you a little. For education purposes."

Suddenly, a cold chill crept up his spine.

Cassie and Nephis were standing up, as well.

"W—wait… wait a minute! This has somehow gone terribly wrong. It was just a little joke! Today is supposed to be my day off, okay? Don't do anything rash!"

A small smile appeared on Neph's face, with dangerous sparks

dancing in her eyes.

"You don't have to worry… we won't rush…"

His five shadows observed the scene with a mix of disdain and pity. A few of them shook their heads dejectedly.

'Why are they so angry?!'

After a moment, the shadows winced.

…Loud sounds of something heavy crashing into the floor resounded from the mess deck of the Chain Breaker for a while after that.

Chapter-1431: Tea and Dessert

In the end, Sunny was not killed. However, he did receive a few bruises… considering that his skin was not easy to bruise due to the Marble Shell, it went to show just how much his little stunt had angered the three women.

Luckily, they calmed down pretty fast.

Even luckier, Sunny had wisely finished his breakfast before drawing their ire… in the aftermath of his punishment, the mess deck was in complete disarray, and there was nothing edible left on the overturned table. The wrath of three infuriated Masters was a frightening thing.

'Ah… I don't get it… it was just a little joke…'

Rubbing his sides resentfully, Sunny stared at Nephis, Cassie, and Jet. Of course, he was smart enough to keep these thoughts to himself. Otherwise, a few bruises would be the least of his problems.

His companions, in turn, were staring at the surrounding mess.

"We… should probably tidy up."

Cassie's voice sounded uncertain. Jet gave her a glance and shrugged:

"Won't it tidy itself up at the end of the day? Everything will go back to how it was."

The blind girl hesitated.

"Still. Let's clean what we can now."

Sunny was not really keen on cleaning on his day off, but he could always make Fiend do it for him. Before he did, however, Cassie suddenly said that he and Nephis should leave it to her and Jet.

Neph was still suffering from the symptoms of essence exhaustion, while Sunny was supposed to be resting. So, the blind girl told them to go enjoy the dessert on the upper deck.

Nephis seemed unconvinced, but Sunny was shaken. He remained silent for a while, then asked solemnly:

"There's… dessert?"

After that, the two of them were sent out of the devastated mess deck.

Soon, Sunny found himself sitting in the shade of the sacred tree, having an improvised picnic with Neph. There was indeed dessert on a cloth in front of him, as well as another pot of freshly brewed tea. Drinking hot tea while surrounded by the chilly mist was a special kind of pleasure.

They spent some time in comfortable silence. Sunny was tired of having the same conversations over and over again, and Nephis seemed to be keeping her questions back.

He let out a satisfied sigh.

"This is great… what is it?"

He pointed to one of the bowls, causing Nephis to glance at him. She lingered for a moment.

"Just a simple fruit salad. Sorry… I didn't have time to make anything fancy. Plus, the supplies we received in Fallen Grace are not very varied."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"Are desserts also included in the Legacy nutrition course? How strange!"

She coughed, then looked away and remained silent for a while. Then, Nephis suddenly stood up and said:

"I'll… I'll go brew more tea."

With that, she disappeared, leaving him alone.

Sunny stared into the mist, then lowered his gaze and looked at his hand. Soon, a black flame appeared above it. A few seconds after it did, his skin started to blister.

And a few moments after that, Sunny winced and dismissed the flame.

His slightly burned skin shone with dark radiance and slowly healed itself. Then, he summoned the flame again. His hand was burned once more.

Sunny repeated the process several times. Each time, he couldn't keep going for more than a dozen seconds before dismissing the fire. Even if he consciously willed himself to endure, his instincts took over.

'I wonder if I can get used to this.'

His expression turned somber.

"I'm back."

Nephis sat down, carrying a new pot of tea. Noticing the black flame on his palm, she froze for a second.

"What is that?"

Sunny made the fire disappear and smiled faintly.

"I used the Mirror of Truth to copy your Dormant Ability. That is how I healed Jet on the way back."

She contemplated for a few moments, then nodded.

"Good decision."

Looking at her with a complicated expression, Sunny sighed.

"But I don't have your lineage Attribute, so the fire burns me. It hurts like hell. I don't know how you do it."

Sunny was almost constantly using his Aspect. Even when there was

no active threat, his shadows were always out and about, either serving as his eyes or augmenting his body. Many routine tasks were solved with Shadow Step and Shadow Manifestation.

Nephis, on the contrary, used her Aspect as rarely as possible. She did not even summon its powers in most battles, relying solely on her training and skill. It was only when the enemy was overwhelmingly dangerous that she resorted to using the soulflame.

But even then, it seemed like too much. The pain of her Flaw was unbearable.

She shook her head.

"Says the man who has been killed terribly many times already, but has no intention of slowing down. Dying over and over again, reliving the same day… I don't know what I would have done in your situation."

Sunny smiled.

"You say that… but come on. We both know that you would have seen it as a wonderful opportunity to fit more sword practice in your schedule."

The corner of Neph's mouth curled upward.

"Maybe I would."

She remained silent for a while, looking into the fog, then said with a hint of wonder in her voice:

"But then again. It would be strange and tempting, to know that no matter what I do, there would be no consequences tomorrow. Maybe I would have done some things that I never dared to do before."

Sunny stared at her in confusion, then frowned.

"Hey! If you are going to insinuate that I'm a pervert again, let me tell you that I'm absolutely innocent. I've not done anything inappropriate in any of these revolutions, nor am I planning to."

He gave her an indignant glance, then suddenly grinned and added in a more subtle tone:

"...Unless you want me to."

Nephis chuckled and looked away.

After a while, she said:

"I wasn't insinuating anything. But it is interesting where your mind immediately went… revealing, even…"

Sunny laughed.

His day off… was going better than he had expected.

He was enjoying it quite a bit.

Chapter-1432: Admission

Sunny and Nephis shared the desserts and enjoyed the tea. Their conversation flowed easily. Time passed slowly, but eventually, she rose and went to check on Jet and Cassie. Soon, the sound of her light steps faded away, and Sunny was left alone.

He leaned on the trunk of the sacred tree, looking into the fog.

His heart felt warm and at peace.

But at the same time…

Sunny could not throw what Neph had said out of his head.

'Do something that I never dared to do before…'

There were a few things he could think of.

He sighed and stared into the distance.

Sunny… had complicated relationships with his closest companions, to say the least. Nephis, Cassie, and he — there was a mess of emotions trapped between the three of them. Most of the things they wanted to say to each other had been left unspoken for a long time.

Especially between Sunny and Nephis.

He hesitated.

At this point, he would have to be a complete fool to remain blind to how he felt. Sunny shifted uncomfortably and lowered his gaze. His heart suddenly felt stifled. He grimaced, then brushed his hand across the wooden deck.

'Just say it. Can't you even say it?'

If he couldn't even say it now, then when would he?

Wasn't he supposed to be the most honest person in two worlds? So why couldn't he even be honest with himself?

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then let out a heavy sigh.

'I… care about Nephis.'

No, that was not it. That was just being coy. He grimaced and looked up, at the swaying branches of the sacred tree.

Sunny remained motionless for a while. Then, he took a deep breath.

And thought:

'I love Nephis.'

His expression collapsed.

It was true. It had been, for a long time. Sunny was not the most emotionally intelligent person, or at least he had not been before. If anything, his emotional development had been stunted — first by the rough life in the outskirts, then by the ruthless reality of the Nightmare Spell.

Who had time to think about emotions when every day was a lethal battle for survival?

So, it had taken him a long time to recognize the truth of how he felt for Nephis ever since the Forgotten Shore. In truth, he had already been in love with her before they reached the Dark City… hopelessly so, perhaps.

And those feelings had not grown any weaker despite their many bitter disagreements. In fact, they were the reason why Sunny was so often infuriated with Nephis — if he felt nothing for her, he would not have cared either way.

His feelings had not faded or disappeared despite the long period of separation, either. If anything, they only grew more intense, almost becoming an obsession. To be stronger than her… to be equal to her.

To be free of her?

That was what he had claimed, but it was a lie.

The indescribable relief, joy, and completeness he had felt when she returned to the waking world. The maddening fury he had felt when she unanimously decided to join Valor. The deathly terror he had felt when the Skinwalker snapped her neck.

By now, there was no denying it.

Whether through fate or coincidence, for better or worse, Nephis was… his person. The only one there was, and would be, for him.

More than that…

Sunny was not blind. Even though neither of them had ever dared to say it aloud, he knew that she felt the same way.

It wasn't that hard to see.

However, there was a reason why both of them kept quiet. Too many reasons, really.

He lowered his head and closed his eyes for a moment.

It was not because both of them did not really know how to handle their feelings and were shy about such things. Emotions were terribly messy, and that was just on their own. But when there were other obstacles involved…

Sunny and Nephis had different goals, and most of those goals were directly opposed to each other. Her pursuit of revenge against the Spell left no space for something as frivolous as affection… or at least, in her heart, affection would always have to take the backseat.

As for him…

He had his reasons to stay silent as well.

But maybe… maybe here in the loop, he didn't have to.

"How sweet."

Sunny flinched and opened his eyes.

The hateful sword wraith was standing in the mist, staring at him coldly.

"Ah, young love… well, you aren't wrong. I've been forced to watch you two circling each other fearfully for so long that it makes me sick to simply remember. At least you idiot finally admitted it. My, oh my. All it took was dying dozens of times."

Sunny looked away.

"Shut up."

There was no energy in his voice.

The Sin of Solace grinned.

"So, what are you going to do now? Gather your courage and confess?"

Sunny threw a sharp gaze at him.

"So what if I do?"

The apparition laugh.

"Well, well. I wish you luck. Oh, there's just one problem… she's going to forget everything, isn't she? How cowardly of you. Seems rather unfair to the poor girl."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

The bastard… was right. As much as he hated to admit it, the wraith was telling the truth.

He hesitated, then spat:

"Then I'll do it after we escape the loop. Why, you think I won't?"

The Sin of Solace stared at him for a while, then sighed. Shaking his

head, the sword wraith crouched and looked him in the eyes.

"Aren't you forgetting something else, though?"

Sunny frowned, unwilling to answer. However, the apparition did it in his stead:

"You're her slave, Sunless. She owns you. What kind of relationship do you think is possible between the two of you, as long as your bonds remain?"

Sunny's expression grew ugly. Angered, he looked away and uttered through gritted teeth:

"She would never use it."

The Sin of Solace smiled.

"Oh? Won't she? How do you know? If there's one thing that this Nightmare proves, it's that no one knows what the future holds. I mean, all your precious friends are right here, changed into Corrupted monsters, going around slaughtering people. Even you are no different!

Have you ever expected that Jet would brutally murder you one day? Or that Effie would satiate her hunger with your flesh? Funny that you are expecting Nephis to never abuse her power over you in the same way."

The wraith leaned closer:

"After all, she already did."

Sunny's mouth twitched.

"That… was to save my life. And she swore to never do it again."

The apparition laughed.

"But she already broke that oath!"

Sunny frowned, staring at him angrily.

"What are you talking about? That time when she begged me not to die? That hardly constitutes a command."

The Sin of Solace was smiling.

"No, no… it was that time the Drowned attacked the Chain Breaker. What did she say back then? Go, I'll handle things here! And then you instantly went into the water to fight the leviathan."

Sunny looked at him in confusion.

"What? I was going to, anyway."

But the apparition's smile only widened.

"Were you?"

The mist was swirling around them, cold and suffocating. Sunny tried to remember how their first battle with the Drowned had gone, exactly, and scowled.

"Yes, I was! Even if I wasn't… it was just a slip of the tongue."

The sword wraith looked at him disdainfully.

"A slip of the tongue? Certainly, certainly… if you say so. Yet, can you imagine having a relationship with someone who can rob you of your free will with a simple slip of the tongue? How do you imagine such a relationship working? What kind of perverse partnership would it be? Are you really willing to be at her mercy, always, and absolutely?"

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Gods. You are so odious. So loathsome. So pathetic… tell me, is there a more pathetic thing than a slave who begins to trust his slaver?"

Sunny stared at him silently, not knowing what to answer.

Eventually, the apparition chuckled, shook his head, then stood up and walked away. His dark figure disappeared into the mist, as if it

had never been here.

"If you are, go and surrender!"

Sunny lowered his head.

A dark storm was raging in his mind.

'Curse it… curse it… curse my Flaw, and curse the Shadow Bond. I wish it had never existed…'

The cold mist swirled around his face, hiding it.

The world was silent.

Chapter-1433: Trying Something New

Sunny remained under the sacred tree for a while, staring silently into the mist. The cold wind blew from beyond the island, bringing with it an insidious chill. The silence was only broken by the muffled rustling of leaves.

His thoughts were dark.

He did not know how much time had passed, exactly, when something seemed to change about the world. Sunny let out a quiet sigh and rose to his feet, hugging himself to preserve what little warmth remained from escaping into the fog.

Looking down, he lingered for a few moments, and then said somberly:

"So you are finally here."

At first, there was no response.

Then, the fog moved slightly, revealing a vague silhouette that had been hidden by its flowing veil. A wraith made of mist was standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker, mere meters away. Her inhumanly cold blue eyes were gazing at him with no emotion.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"No wonder it took me a whole week to catch up on sleep."

Every time Sunny slept, he would come to his senses at the start of the loop. There were two possible explanations for why he did — either Sunny was sleeping for too long… or something killed him while he slept.

He had assumed that it was the former. But now, he knew that it was the latter.

His hands trembled and turned into fists.

'Of course…of course. Why else?'

For dozens of revolutions, Sunny had been telling his companions to hide inside the Chain Breaker and wait while he risked his life exploring the island.

But who said that the ship was safe?

Sunny had never seen Undying Slaughter find it. But today was also the first time he had remained on the Chain Breaker for more than a couple of hours, awake…

'Curse you…'

A deep darkness shrouded his eyes.

It meant that every time Sunny had left, thinking that his companions would be safe, the mist wraith discovered them.

And killed them.

Cassie and Jet had been killed terribly, over and over again, while he was gallivanting around the island.

Nephis had been killed, too.

Or had she been?

Would he have felt if his master was no more? Would the Spell have announced her passing? If Sunny had checked his runes… would he have seen her name grow dim and disappear?

Staring at Undying Slaughter, Sunny gritted his teeth.

"I'll… destroy you."

As a bitter smile appeared on his lips, he took a step forward and added calmly:

"...One day."

The mist wraith moved.

Not long after that, Sunny died.

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Sunny was crouching on the deck of the Chain Breaker once again. Straightening, he looked into the fog.

His face remained motionless.

After a while, a sigh escaped from his lips

'Well. I guess my break is over.'

He turned his head and silently watched as Nephis and Cassie discussed the Guiding Light. They had forgotten the events of the previous revolution… the conversations they had with him, the laughter they shared. Everything was now erased, and his companions did not even know that they had lost something.

But he knew.

On this damned island, only two beings remembered everything. Sunny… and the Sin of Solace. The wraith conjured from his own mind by the echo of Ariel's whisper.

Looking down, Sunny pressed down on the wooden railing hard enough to hear it crack, then took a step back.

This time, he did not mount Nightmare immediately. Instead, Sunny concentrated and summoned the runes.

Something about his posture must have attracted the attention of his companions, because they both suddenly grew silent. A moment later, Nephis asked:

"Sunny? What is it?"

His gaze fell at the bottom of the field of runes. He remained silent

for a bit, then answered calmly:

"I am going to try something. I'm not sure what will happen, exactly, so… stay calm."

With that, Sunny took a deep breath and called upon the Fragment of Shadow Realm.

It was strange… the Fragment was not a Memory, and neither was it an Echo or a Shadow. As such, he did not really know how to make it manifest. A mere Ascended Tyrant's essence was surely insufficient to summon a piece of a god's Domain into existence.

And yet… somehow, Sunny knew exactly what to do. That knowledge was buried deep in his soul, as if he had always known.

In the next moment…

The world around them suddenly grew dimmer.

Then dimmer, dimmer, and dimmer still.

A strong gale rose, making Sunny's black mantle flutter. It was as though his figure was devouring all light, replacing it with an endless shadow.

His eyes widened.

Behind Sunny, Cassie shuddered.

"What…"

It was as though a tide of darkness flooded the world, rolling outward from the Chain Breaker. The sacred tree instantly disappeared from view, drowned in it, as did the figure of Saint at the bow of the ship. The dark cliffs could not be seen a moment later.

The darkness did not stop there.

Even though Nephis and Cassie could not perceive it, Sunny could, somehow… he felt the entire island being swallowed by the shadow he had unleashed, with all light becoming extinguished in an instant.

Soon, it was as though they were standing in a lightless, black void. Only Sunny could see that the world had not really disappeared… it was still there. The sacred tree still swayed subtly in the wind, and Saint was still standing at the bow. The dark cliffs were where they had been a few moments ago. The mist still swirled and flowed, only now, it was like a liquid darkness.

And he could feel…

'So that's what it is.'

The Fragment of the Shadow Realm… was, unsurprisingly, a shadow.

A shadow so vast and ancient that his mind failed to comprehend its scale, so deep and unfathomable that his heart trembled in front of it. More than that… if Sunny wasn't mistaken, this inconceivable shadow was… of the Divine Rank.

It was lightless and black, but shone with the golden light of divinity in his vision at the same time.

It was not alive, but it wasn't empty like the shadows of inanimate objects, either.

It did not belong to Sunny, and yet, he was connected to it, somehow.

Even though Sunny had summoned it… he was, perhaps, not qualified yet to be its master.

Chapter-1434: World of Darkness

As Sunny stood frozen in the world of darkness, Nephis summoned a Memory lantern and raised it, illuminating the deck of the Chain Breaker. A small island of warm light appeared around them — however, it was not nearly as wide as it should have been, as if the lantern was struggling to push back the unfathomable shadow.

Its light trembled pitifully.

"Sunny… what did you do?"

He lingered with the answer, then said honestly:

"I summoned a fragment of Shadow God's domain. You must have seen it in my runes… it's a Legacy Relic I received."

The Fragment had already swallowed all of Wind Flower. Sunny could feel it… which was strange. As an Ascended Tyrant, he could control his shadows from around twenty kilometers away. However, the range of his shadow sense was much more modest, less even than that of his vision.

How was it that he could vaguely sense the far side of the island?

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then carefully extended his shadow sense… however, he did not extend it outward. Instead, he extended it into the Fragment.

In the next moment, Sunny yelped, staggered, and fell.

"Ah, hell!"

Before he landed on the hard wood, Nephis caught him.

Suddenly, her concerned face was very close.

"Are you alright?"

He retracted his shadow sense, and stared at her for a few strangely awkward moments. Then, Sunny coughed and nodded.

There was a salty taste of blood on his tongue.

"Yes. I just… overdid it a little."

Supported by her, he rose to his feet and grimaced.

"This Domain Fragment… I'm not sure what else it can do, but it definitely enhances the range of my shadow sense. To a degree where I can perceive everywhere on the island, at the same time — well, except for the tower. It seems to be shielded from view, somehow. Needless to say, that's not something that a human brain, even that of a Master, is wired to handle."

The sensory overload he had been blasted with was not something he wanted to experience again. Even though it was only like a minuscule fraction of the indescribable horror of using [Where is my eye?], the strain was still too much for Sunny.

And that was not even counting what he would perceive… there were all kinds of great and terrible creatures on Wind Flower, and witnessing some of them was dangerous in and of itself.

Not to mention that more than one of these beings were capable of staring back at him.

That said… Sunny was almost certain that he could be more precise with spreading his senses through the Fragment.

He reassured Nephis and Cassie that everything was alright, and made another attempt.

…A moment later, his stifled scream traveled through the mist.

In the end, it took Sunny some time, and a lot of cursing, to teach himself how to limit the scope of his shadow sense to a comparatively

narrow area. The boon of this situation was that he could concentrate on any location on the island… meaning that he could observe all of it at will.

He could also feel something else…

As long as he remained in the unfathomable depths of the Fragment, his Aspect seemed to be enhanced. It was as if the ancient shadow was nourishing it… Sunny was not sure yet what this enhancement meant, but it had to be useful.

As soon as he grew confident in not collapsing after extending his shadow sense into the dark distance, Sunny concentrated and searched for Jet. Soon, he felt her moving through the forest. Drops of blood fell into the moss, and a murderous wraith was pursuing her.

'How convenient.'

Jumping into the saddle, Sunny warned Nephis and Cassie to stay on the Chain Breaker and sent his steed into the mist.

The next hour went somewhat differently from how it usually was. The descent of the Shadow Realm Fragment affected his companions enough so that their familiar reactions and thoughts changed… but overall, it was all the same.

Sunny rescued Jet, healed her with the help of the Mirror of Truth, and returned to the Chain Breaker. Then, he explained the nature of the loop to the members of the cohort.

After that, however…

Sunny had to make new decisions.

Now that he knew that leaving his companions on the Chain Breaker was tantamount to leaving them for dead, there was no other choice but to venture into the mist together… which was a moot point, really, considering that he had already decided to rely on teamwork more before his break.

His goal of compiling a time map of Wind Flower had become much easier, as well, due to how far his shadow sense could reach in the

boundary of the Fragment.

Perhaps the best thing about the Fragment of Shadow's Domain was that it existed independently of Sunny. It was not manifested from his essence, and did not consume it to exist. On the flipside, it was also not under his control.

Although Sunny could benefit from being within a piece of Shadow God's Domain, he had not magically become akin to a Sovereign.

There was an unexpected, but welcome side effect to his innate connection to the inconceivable shadow, though…

It was that the rudimentary affinity to water that the Crown of Twilight granted him could spread through the Fragment, as well. And since mist was made of water, Sunny found himself capable of influencing the fog.

He could make it thicker, or push it away from a certain area.

It was hard to say how beneficial, exactly, such an ability would be. But Sunny felt that he would find a way to use it to his advantage.

Other than that, the most obvious advantage of the Fragment was that Sunny could manifest it into tangible objects. Even though these objects were manifested with Ascended essence, their origin was still a Divine shadow. As such, they were much more powerful and robust than what he had been able to conjure up previously.

Of course, using them burned a tremendously larger amount of essence in proportion.

The last thing Sunny experimented with was dismissing the Fragment of the Shadow Realm.

Sadly… it seemed impossible. Just as he had expected, once unleashed, the Fragment couldn't be taken back.

Or at least he had no authority to do so.

The only exception was the Shadow Lantern. Sunny discovered that he could hide the Fragment inside the Divine Memory… but,

strangely enough, he couldn't summon it back from it. Once the inconceivable shadow entered the gate of the black lantern, it was as though it disappeared forever.

He was somewhat disheartened, but at the same elated.

Armed with the Fragment and the Mirror of Truth and supported by the members of the cohort… suddenly, Sunny felt that creating a moving map of Wind Flower was not as impossible of a task anymore.

Without wasting any time, he got to work.

He was going to find a way to escape this endless hell, and take his companions with him.

Chapter-1435: Time Map

Over the next few revolutions, Sunny repeated the same actions. He would summon the Fragment of Shadow Realm, rescue Jet, enter the cave system below the island with the cohort, and slay the Cavern Terror. Then, they would proceed to the far side of the island, find Effie, and hide from danger until the end of the loop.

Each time, the time it took to reach the northern edge of Wind Flower grew shorter… but it was still not nearly short enough.

So, Sunny continued to study the island and perfect his time map. He kept the cohort safe — or at least tried to — and explored Wind Flower through shadow sense.

He progressed swiftly due to how drastically the Fragment extended its reach. Sunny already knew which places on the island were too dangerous to observe, so he managed to avoid drawing the attention of the beings who dwelled there. Apart from those horrors, the rest of the creatures imprisoned on Wind Flower were now like an open book to him.

Or rather, somewhat like an open book. Although he could perceive the movement of their shadows, that unique sense of his was not a true replacement for sight. Nor could it replace the experience of actually facing the abominations… luckily, Sunny had already done so in the previous revolutions. Combined with his already existing experience, shadow sense was enough to help him compile a map.

He experimented with the Mirror of Truth, as well, to a varying degree of success.

The second Aspect Ability Sunny tried to copy was Cassie's premonition — he judged that sensing a few seconds into the future would make him nearly invincible. However, Sunny was left disappointed. He seemed to possess the right affinity to use her

Ability with a high level of efficiency, but it was simply too strange.

He had long been accustomed to perceiving the world from different points of view simultaneously — that was how he was able to scout through his shadows, after all. His mental ability was further increased by the Shroud of Dusk. However… suddenly perceiving two distinct, but moving and overlapping threads of time was just too much.

The first time Sunny activated the premonition Ability, he instantly got disoriented and fell to the ground. Simply trying to take a step was enough to paralyze him. Dazed and lost, he stumbled around blindly for a while, then deactivated the enchantment of the Mirror of Truth and watched it crumble into pieces. His head was spinning.

Perhaps Sunny could adapt to Cassie's strange way of perceiving the world, but it was not going to be a short process. His time was better spent exploring other opportunities.

Neph's Ability to control fire, on the other hand, was easy enough to master. Sadly, it was not very useful without her affinities and her soulflame. The same could be said about Cassie's Ability to perceive the world through someone else.

Then, there was Jet. Sunny had high hopes for her Ascended Ability — not because it allowed her to absorb fragments of shattered soul cores and improve her own, but because it removed the limit of how much her body could be enhanced by essence.

Sunny had an enormous reserve of essence, as far as Masters were concerned… so, he thought that he could make himself as powerful as a Saint with the help of this Ability.

Outrageously, his first attempt ended in one of the most gruesome deaths he had experienced in the loop. As it turned out, the ability to oversaturate her flesh with essence worked for Jet only because of her unique constitution — not quite dead, but also not alive. When Sunny tried doing the same, he was quite literally torn apart from the inside.

He did not make the second attempt.

Her Dormant Ability could allow him to absorb the essence of the enemies he killed — a useful tool, but not useful enough to sacrifice the Mirror of Truth for, at least not in their current situation. Her Awakened Ability, though, was extremely powerful. Being able to strike the souls of his enemies directly… it was hard to describe how much more deadly of a creature it made Sunny.

Effie's physical augmentation wasn't bad, either.

However… there was one Ability that outshone them all.

It was Cassie's Dormant Ability.

That Ability allowed her to learn a lot about the Aspects and Attributes of Awakened, as well as the Attributes and unholy powers of Nightmare Creatures. Cassie had to be close to receive that information, but Sunny… Sunny could rely on his shadows to serve as his eyes. He could even gain some knowledge purely through shadow sense.

That allowed him to study the prisoners of Wind Flower infinitely faster than he had ever expected.

Slowly but surely, his knowledge of Wind Flower grew. Armed with that knowledge, the cohort managed to kill the Rotting Leopard. They clashed and triumphed over the giant octopus-like abomination, as well. They even learned how to destroy the swarm of black millipedes.

The time map he had been trying to create was becoming more and more complete.

There were empty spaces on it, of course — for example, Sunny had never managed to learn much about the tower. There were a few places on the island that were too lethal for him to explore, as well. But he did not need to study them, anyway, because his goal was not the exploration of Wind Flower.

His goal was simply to get to Effie and return to the Chain Breaker in time, then escape this hell and never look back.

Nevertheless…

The closer his time map came to completion, the colder Sunny felt.

It was because he was growing more and more wary of the truths he learned.

The purpose of creating the map was to track the movements of the dangerous Nightmare Creatures across the island throughout the loop. He needed to know about them to create the most efficient path to the far side of the island and back… to rescue both Jet and Effie and leave Wind Flower in the span of a single day.

However, once Sunny had most of the information he needed…

He felt nothing but dread, realizing that that goal was utterly unattainable.

Even the most efficient of the remotely safe routes was not fast enough to get him to where he needed to be. Even if he made Effie ride Nightmare, there was not enough time.

With their current strength, and with the tools available to them, making a round trip across the island before the loop terminated seemed simply impossible.

Chapter-1436: Heavy Burden

Sunny was on the deck of the Chain Breaker once again. He straightened and looked into the mist, his eyes sunken.

"Doesn't work… that doesn't work. Should we abandon the caverns route?"

His bleak voice was quiet enough to not be heard by Nephis and Cassie. Although Sunny had been careful not to overwork himself too much again, the strain of surviving… and failing to survive… on Wind Flower was slowly getting to him.

It was hard, to keep himself from succumbing to hopelessness and numbness. Sunny had known many bitter defeats, but being crushed over and over again still burdened him. More than that, his mindset was slowly deteriorating into not caring about whether he lived or died at all…

Why would he care if all that waited after death was another revolution, and then another, and another, endlessly and without reprieve?

If there was one thing that kept him grounded and served as an anchor for his sanity, it was the fact that watching his companions die was always an agony. Even knowing that they would be reborn in the loop did not ease the pain and desperation Sunny felt each time he micalculated and led them to their deaths.

If he was by himself, he probably would not have given up… but his focus and determination would have deteriorated much faster.

He had to take the members of the cohort away from Wind Flower, though… Jet, Cassie. Effie and her baby. Nephis…

That thought kept him motivated.

He was the only one who could. Due to a random twist of fate, Sunny possessed a cursed sword which made him able to remember the previous revolutions. That alone placed him ahead of everyone else on the island… in fact, simply knowing that they had to escape was already half of the victory.

It was just that the other half had turned out to be insurmountable.

And it was hard, to carry all that burden all by himself.

"No, the cavern route is the safest, which makes it the fastest."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"It's simple. Since nothing works, I have to explore more possibilities… the Mirror of Truth, that is the answer. I should make it reflect more Nightmare Creatures… ah, but not Beasts, and Monsters, and Demons. Only Devils and those above them will do."

Sunny was motionless, going over the collection of horrors stored in his mind.

There were not that many beings on Wind Flowers that both fit the criteria and could be caught in the reflection of the Mirror of Truth without getting him killed. The Cavern Terror was one of them… the creature hidden in the port, as well, although escaping from it alive was not easy…

Of course, there were Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast, as well. But they were even more deadly.

Suddenly, a strange disharmony entered his thoughts. Sunny frowned and tried to discover its source… what was it? Why did he feel that something was wrong?

It took him some time to realize that Cassie and Nephis, who were supposed to be discussing the Guiding Light behind him, were strangely silent.

Looking back, he saw that the blind girl had already used the sacred staff to determine where Effie was located. Nephis was studying the vague shapes of the dark cliffs.

His frown deepened.

'It… changed? Why?'

Sunny was sure that they had not heard him muttering to himself. Had he done something else to affect the usual flow of events, or failed to do something to keep it stable?

'I don't think I did, though…'

Sunny rubbed his face. Perhaps his posture or presence influenced Cassie and Nephis without him noticing?

"Sunny?"

He shook off his confusion and looked at Nephis.

"Yeah… I'm fine. Actually, there's something I need to do. Stay calm. I'll summon the Fragment of Shadow Domain in a moment…"

The world was devoured by the primordial shadow once again. Sunny mounted Nightmare and left the Chain Breaker once again. He found Jet and brought her back once again.

This time, he did not use the Mirror of Truth to copy Soul Flame and heal her right away, though. Although it was a little cruel to Jet, Sunny could not allow himself to waste the miraculous Memory that way. Her wounds would be healed by Nephis in a couple of hours, regardless.

Everything went as usual… however, when he returned to the Chain Breaker, the strangeness continued. The conversations seemed to be the same, but something felt out of place.

It was only when they reached the bone orchard and started rending the Hollow Butterfly that he finally figured out what was wrong. Jet and Nephis were resting while he and Cassie were busy splitting the tough chitin on the Great Monster…

And the blind girl seemed strangely distracted, moving slower than she was supposed to.

'Right. It all started when she failed to make her usual remarks about the Guiding Light.'

He had only noticed that Cassie was behaving strangely that late because she usually kept quiet while the others talked. Her subtle reactions, however, had been different from the familiar ones all along.

'What is going on?'

Sunny stopped what he was doing and stared at Cassie with a slight frown. Eventually, he asked:

"Cassie? Is everything alright with you?"

She froze, then turned to face him and lingered for a few moments.

"Yes? I think so… I just have this strange feeling."

He raised his eyebrow.

"What feeling?"

It was an ominous sign that their oracle was having a strange feeling. Cassie's premonitions were never trivial, and were usually the harbingers of terrifying events. But what could have triggered this premonition? Nothing was supposed to change on Wind Flower, unless Sunny was the one to change it.

He waited tensely to hear her response, all kinds of dreadful theories flashing in his mind.

However…

When Cassie finally answered, all those thoughts disappeared, replaced by stunned silence.

She shrugged.

"It's nothing serious. I just can't get rid of this feeling of déjà vu."

Sunny stared at without saying anything.

'Déjà vu?'

Wasn't that… wasn't that how he himself had first come to recognize the twisted nature of time on Wind Flower?

He blinked.

Was Cassie becoming aware of the loop, too?

Chapter-1437: One Pebble

Throughout the rest of the loop, Cassie continued to be a little off. The changes were subtle, but Sunny could easily spot them. After all, he had been going through these tribulations for a long time now… anything that was different from how things were supposed to go drew his attention.

Cassie was clearly in a slightly dazed state — not unlike how he had been the first time around. Otherwise, she would have realized that having a persistent sense of déjà vu on an island where time endlessly repeated itself had to mean something.

Then again, she might have simply attributed it to the time loop and moved on. It was only Sunny who knew that the blind girl was acting differently from how she had in the previous revolutions.

'Why is this happening?'

Cassie was distracted because of her strange mental state, while Sunny was distracted because of Cassie. The cohort had slain the Cavern Terror, traversed the system of caves, and obliterated the swarm of black millipedes.

Finally, they climbed out of the chasm and ventured into the misty forest.

Now that it was submerged in darkness, Sunny found it much easier to move forward. He was in his element. He could also track the movements of the Nightmare Creatures populating this part of the island, not to mention the fact that he already knew what they were capable of.

Some abominations had to be avoided at all costs, some could be challenged. It was easier to avoid the former, and not as hard to slay the latter. Armed with knowledge and the element of surprise, the

cohort made swift progress.

Eventually, there came a moment when Sunny told everyone to slow down and took the lead. Banishing the mist from a small area in front of them, he called:

"Effie! Do not…"

As soon as he spoke, a grey spear flashed toward him with tremendous speed, as if shot from a devastating siege engine.

Holding back a sigh, Sunny moved to the side and effortlessly caught the spear with his bare hand. The power of Effie's throw was scary enough to drag him back a few steps, but he easily kept his balance.

"...throw that damned spear at me!"

Nephis and Jet had barely had any time to react. They both stared at the deadly weapon held in his hand with astonishment.

Cassie, though… did not seem too surprised. Her soft lips moved, as if she was whispering something to herself.

Effie's figure was already revealed, standing in the darkness.

"D—doofus?"

Sunny scoffed.

"Who else would it be? Come, take your spear back. It's heavy."

The rest of the revolution went without anything dire happening. Sunny was in no mood to try anything dangerous, anyway — he was busy recalculating various possibilities, coming up with new solutions, and observing Cassie.

From time to time, he also looked at Effie.

The boisterous huntress had been put off a little at the start, noticing that he was not reacting to her teasing. But after Jet explained the nature of the loop to her, she understood why Sunny seemed different from his usual self.

Tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, Effie looked at him bashfully.

"Ah… so you've heard all these jokes already? Dozens of times? Uh… crap… I didn't think I was that predictable…"

Luckily, Nephis was there to be flustered in his place. Watching the huntress explain what had happened to her, Sunny couldn't help but think about Effie.

It was… an incredibly stupid thing, what she had done. Getting pregnant in the middle of a war was not exactly smart. Even if it had not been intentional, the result was the same. Still…

He could understand, somewhat. Passions were high on the battlefield, and even the smartest people were prone to making mistakes when they were not thinking straight. Gods knew he had made his own share of stupid decisions. Plus, modern medicine was often unreliable when it came to Awakened, especially the more powerful ones…

Sunny did not know if Effie had taken steps to prevent this exact situation from happening, but even if she had, they might have ended up failing her.

Even if that was not the case, he could understand.

But how the hell had she ended up being pregnant in a Nightmare?

'...Bad luck, really. An avalanche of misfortune that started with a single pebble.'

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

Indeed, Effie had never had any intentions of challenging the Third Nightmare. She was only here because of a series of tragic events that no one could have foreseen.

It had to have started not long after she found out about her condition. Back then, the government forces escorting Wake of Ruin were never meant to participate in a large-scale battle.

They were simply there as observers… and yet, when the Great Gates opened during the Battle of the Black Skull, Effie had no choice but to escape into the Dream Realm, just like the rest of the Masters and Saints there.

In the Nightmare Desert, Beastmaster offered her a way out. But the members of the cohort had no plans of challenging a Seed then. Their goal was to reach the Black Pyramid… Effie must have thought that they would either escape or die in a matter of days, or weeks at most. Her pregnancy was not supposed to become an issue.

Unlike the rest of them, Effie had already lost one cohort. Her original companions had all perished in the catacombs below the Dark City. The thought of becoming the lone survivor once again… must have been unbearable.

So, she chose to remain with her friends.

It was only after Beastmaster, Seishan, Morgan, and Sir Gilead left that a decision to follow Mordret into a Nightmare was made. At that point, the only choice Effie had was to challenge the Seed with them… or remain in the desert alone to not become a burden to her companions.

But even if she had chosen the latter, the members of the cohort would have definitely not allowed her to commit suicide out of misguided consideration for their well-being.

And here they were.

Sunny looked away and sighed again.

'...It must have been hard on her.'

Effie always put up a carefree front, but he knew that behind it, she had known just as much heartbreak and sorrow as the rest of them… if not more. Making the decisions she had made, no matter right or wrong, could not have been easy.

In fact, it was the opposite. Every step of the way must have been frightening, heavy, and difficult.

'I have to get her out of this hellhole alive.'

They would deal with the rest later.

...Eventually, the revolution came to an end.

And when the next one started, Sunny was startled by an unexpected noise.

Looking back, he saw that Cassie had dropped the Guiding Light, which clattered and rolled across the deck.

Her expression was frozen.

Taking a step toward the blind girl, Sunny lingered for a moment, and asked:

"What's the matter?"

Cassie slowly turned to face him and took a shallow breath.

Her words were exactly what he expected to hear:

"Sunny. I… I… I remember."

Chapter-1438: Hiring an Assistant

Sunny did not know how many revolutions it had taken him to become aware of the loop. However, he knew that around two months had passed since he did — that was how much longer it had taken for Cassie to join him in knowing the truth.

Standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Sunny stared at the blind girl intensely. He was feeling a strange mix of emotions… relief and gratitude, to start with. He was incredibly elated at the thought of sharing the burden of escaping Wind Flower with someone, especially someone as resourceful and steady as Cassie.

But at the same time, there was a note of unease in his heart.

How exactly had she come to know about the loop? And why?

For him… it was because of the Sin of Solace.

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then suddenly took a step forward and asked, his voice grim:

"You see him too, don't you? Admit it. I know you do."

The blind girl tilted her head a little, an expression of confusion appearing on her face.

"See… who? I don't understand."

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

Was she telling the truth? Or was she only pretending to be oblivious to the Sin of Solace?

If it was the latter… he had to give Cassie and her acting skills credit.

She would be a much better liar than he had ever suspected her to be, if that was the truth.

But why would she hide it? To spare them both the embarrassment, perhaps… gods knew, Sunny would not want anyone to hear the things his inner demon whispered into his ears every day.

If so, it would make sense how Cassie had learned about the loop, and why it had taken her longer to become aware of it. She could only perceive the Sin of Solace by using her Ascended Ability on Sunny, after all, and would thus be far less susceptible to the wraith's influence.

However, it was not necessarily the case that she could see and hear the hateful apparition. In fact, it was far more likely that Cassie was telling the truth — the Sin of Solace only existed in Sunny's mind, and was therefore unlikely to be seen by her while sharing his senses.

She could have simply become aware of the loop because of her unrivaled affinity to fate and revelations. The blind girl had always been able to feel and perceive things that none of them could… it was not outside the realm of possibility that she would slowly learn to sense the twisted nature of time on Wind Flower by herself.

Cassie could have been sincerely confused by his question. Sunny simply did not know.

He frowned a little.

"The Sin of Solace… the sword wraith that follows me around. You can't see him?"

Cassie looked at him silently for a few moments, then smiled faintly.

"How can I see him? I'm blind."

She pointed to her beautiful blue eyes, making Sunny cough in embarrassment.

"No, that's not what I meant… what I meant was… ah, forget it!"

Did it really matter if Cassie could perceive the Sin of Solace or not?

Sunny would prefer it if she couldn't, but if she could and was willing to pretend otherwise… that was fine, as well.

It was not like Cassie had not been pretending to not know various things ever since becoming an Awakened. Her Aspect and Abilities not only allowed her to learn secrets, but also gave her no choice but to learn them. To spare herself and the people to whom those secrets belonged a lot of embarrassment, she probably kept quiet about such things.

At least that was what Sunny thought.

He grimaced, remained silent for a while, and then smiled tentatively.

"Well… anyway. You really remember? That is great news!"

Indeed, it was. At first, Sunny had only considered his mental state, and how sharing the burden with another person would alleviate his fatigue and loneliness.

But really, the benefit was so much greater than that.

With two members of the cohort being able to carry the knowledge of the previous revolutions into the future ones, the range of things they could achieve would double. Everything that Sunny had been doing alone would be done faster, and solutions he had not dared to try would not be nearly as daunting anymore.

More than that, Sunny and Cassie did not need to pursue all these goals together. They could split up and tackle different tasks simultaneously, thus accelerating the entire escape to a great degree.

Of course, he needed to consider his plans carefully. There were things that Cassie could potentially achieve on her own, and things that she would never be able to do without his help. He would have to teach her everything he had come to know, as well… even though the blind girl had become aware of the loop, the current revolution was only her second one.

Sunny, however, had been accumulating knowledge of Wind Flower over more than sixty revolutions. She had to benefit from the

groundwork he had laid before becoming a true ally to him in this timeless hell.

'Yes… I'll have to teach her about the island and the abominations populating it first.'

Cassie, meanwhile, turned to face the mist. The soft lines of her delicate face twisted slightly, expressing her doubts and anxiety.

"Yes… I do remember. But it seems so odd. Like a strange dream."

She lowered her head.

"That Hollow Butterfly… the caverns… the dark forest. And Effie! I can't believe that Effie is…"

It was at that moment that both Cassie and Sunny were suddenly interrupted.

Looking at them in utter confusion, Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"What… are you two talking about?"

She frowned.

"What does Cassie remember, and why is remembering something so important? Caverns, forests, and butterflies? What does it mean? And what is it about Effie?"

The two of them turned to her, surprised. Sunny was suddenly very guilty about forgetting Neph in all the commotion.

'So… I'll have to explain everything again, I guess…'

But then, he suddenly had a thought. The questions were addressed at both of them… so, his Flaw was not compelling him to answer.

Looking down, Sunny patted Cassie on the shoulder and smiled.

"You take this one, Cas. I'll go rescue Jet."

Before the blind girl could even answer, he already mounted Nightmare and disappeared into the mist.

'Ha!'

It was good to have an assistant.

Chapter-1439: Desperate Times

By the time Sunny returned with Jet, Cassie had already explained the situation to Nephis as best as she could. That had already saved him some time — not that it mattered during this revolution.

For now, his goal was to get Cassie up to speed.

As they left the Chain Breaker and headed toward the bone orchard, Sunny started to describe the perils of Wind Flower to her in detail. Jet and Nephis listened, too, growing grimmer with each minute.

"The Devouring Beast is here as well?"

Hearing Jet's somber question, Sunny nodded.

She lingered for a moment.

"Who is Devouring Beast, though?"

'Oh...'

Soul Reaper only knew who Undying Slaughter was because they had met. She had no concept of who the Six Plagues were, and no explanation to how a Defiled version of her could exist on the island.

Sunny explained the things briefly… not that he knew much more than her.

"...We don't know how they exist, or why. These future versions of ourselves are known as the Six Heralds of the Estuary, of the Six Plagues. And two of them are here, on the island — the future version of you, and the future version of Effie."

He lingered for a moment before adding:

"We also don't know how the two of them ended up here. My theory

is that they were exiled to Wind Flower to contain their Flaws, but… it's just conjecture."

Jet's face remained impassive. She nodded silently and did not say anything about his indirect castigation of her Flaw.

Who would like hearing that her personal curse was so terrible that even the Nightmare Creatures had chosen to banish her corrupted future self into isolation?

Sunny let out a quiet sigh and continued explaining things to Cassie. The blind girl was listening to him attentively, seemingly not having trouble with digesting the incredible amount of information. From time to time, she asked him small, but poignant questions.

By the time they reached the bone orchard and found the Hollow Butterfly, Sunny had already shared the most important pieces of knowledge. Before they went about creating the pikes and the javelins, he drew a crude map of the island on the ground.

"...And Effie is here. For now, I have found no way to get to her and return to the Chain Breaker in time."

Cassie, Nephis, and Jet studied the map.

After a few moments of silence, the blind girl asked:

"Have you considered leaving the island with Jet and returning to the loop from the northern side?"

Sunny hesitated for a while. Eventually, he shook his had and said in a grim tone:

"I can't say that I didn't. But it is simply too dangerous… do remember that it's only called north because that's how I drew the map. In reality, I have no idea which side of the island faces which direction. Navigating to Effie's side won't be easy, and it is not even a given that we'll be able to navigate at all while being thrashed by the whirlpool."

His expression turned even darker.

"I don't see us faring well in the vortex — even if we fly above it, the winds would certainly throw us around. We might be able to get back to the island, but not to a landing zone of our choosing. We have gotten incredibly lucky the first time, actually. That beach where we landed is one of the few relatively safe places on Wind Flower.

If we crashed almost anywhere else, we'd be dead in a matter of minutes… even if the abominations dwelling in those places wouldn't have killed us, the thing that hides in the mist above the island would."

Sunny sighed.

"Most importantly, we simply don't know how entering the loop functions. Not only where, but also when we land is a question. We can only leave at the end of the day, when the Crown of Twilight provides me with essence… but if we return to the same point in time, Effie will already be lost. In short, there are too many risks."

Cassie contemplated for a short while, then nodded.

"I see. Remaining on the island seems like the most promising choice, then. But… you have already explored all the routes, and even learned a lot about most Nightmare Creatures here. Some of them, unbelievably, we have even defeated. So why do you say that there is no way to get Effie to the Chain Breaker in time?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then winced.

"The problem is that this damned place is simply impossible to traverse for a bunch of Ascended like us. Sure, we have killed a few of the local residents… but only the weakest and most vulnerable of them, or those that our powers directly counter. The rest are too dreadful for us to fight. So, we can only advance by hiding and timing our movements perfectly.

And that… is too slow to get to the other side and come back in the span of a single day."

The blind girl was studying the map. For a moment, Sunny was reminded of how strange the situation was… Cassie could not see, so

she was simply pretending to look at the map. She seemed to have developed a habit of imitating the actions of those who had sight, in order to not make the people around her feel uncomfortable.

While, in reality, she was actually seeing the map through the eyes of her companions.

He hesitated, then added with a bit of hope in his voice:

"...But that was back when I was the only one with the detailed knowledge of the loop. Now that there are two of us, the situation might change."

Cassie did not answer for a while.

Then, she slowly shook her head.

"No. It won't change."

Sunny was taken aback. He stared at her tensely, then asked, his voice even:

"And why is that?"

The blind girl sighed.

"It's because I am not strong enough to make a decisive difference. Sure, with my help, you can save an hour or two… but that is not enough. Even if we separate, the scope of the things I can accomplish is limited. If this island is too dangerous for you, Sunny, then it is certain death for me."

She frowned.

"Even if we somehow manage to make everyone in the cohort remember the previous revolutions, it will still not be enough. Not that having Nephis, Jet, and Effie slowly being driven mad by that cursed sword of yours is an option."

Sunny's face darkened. He scoffed, then looked away.

"So what are you suggesting we do, then?"

Cassie shrugged.

"We explore every opportunity. The things we've learned offer us no solution. So there is no other choice but to turn to things we've yet to explore, and hope for the best. Starting with…"

She leaned forward slightly and pointed to the map.

Sunny lowered his gaze and looked at where her delicate finger was pointing. His expression changed subtly.

'Of course it's that place…'

The place the blind girl was pointing at was at the very center of the map.

There, a crude image of a tall tower was drawn, surrounded by a wide moat.

Chapter-1440: Desperate Measures

There were several places on the island that Sunny had not dared to explore yet. They were too dangerous, and lay off the route that led to Effie — he was already tormented enough by dying while trying to reach her, so losing his life meaninglessly to satiate his curiosity did not seem like a good idea.

That said… Cassie was right.

It was not as though Sunny had not considered grasping at straws by venturing into these dangerous territories before. He knew that he would most likely end up searching for a solution there eventually… but not before exhausting all other choices.

Well, his choices had been exhausted. Cassie had become aware of the loop just when they had, so he allowed himself to grow hopeful for a few hours. However, she was now reminding him of the harsh reality…

Even if there were two people who remembered the previous revolutions now, it was still not enough to solve the diabolical puzzle of Wind Flower. Even with everything he had learned, there was no feasible way to achieve their goals.

Which meant that they had to expand their efforts to the most dangerous corners of the hellish island.

And the tower… it was the most dangerous of them all by far.

Sunny had already tried to enter it once, during one of the earlier revolutions. However, before he could even cross the bridge… he had died without even realizing what had killed him.

The bones of the dreadful Nightmare Creatures and the abominations standing motionlessly on the bridge only solidified the fact that the stronghold of the Seeker was absolutely deadly — more deadly than the overgrown port, the harrowing shrine, and the eerie circle of black obelisks.

He stared at the map silently.

'...Can't say I'm not curious to get inside, though.'

Wind Flower was just too mysterious. Sunny had been exploring the dreadful island for about two months now, and although he was now familiar with its landscape and dangers, he did not know a lot about its history.

Who was the Seeker that had lived here before, exactly? How had that person been able to not only survive inside the loop, but also build the tower, the port, the shrine, and other structures within it? Or had the vortex not existed yet when they called Wind Flower home? If it had not… was the Seeker responsible for creating it?

Sunny knew, of course, that Wind Flower had not always been trapped within a loop of repeating time. Otherwise, there was no explanation for the existence of the bone orchard, the steps cut into the cliffs, and many other landmarks of the nightmarish island.

Even the line of footprints they had found in the white sand predated the starting point of the loop. They looked like they had been left only a few hours… but in reality, the person who had leapt off the edge of the island must have done so many centuries ago.

Sunny wondered if those were the footprints of the mysterious Seeker.

He also wondered…

'If the loop was really created by someone… can't it be destroyed, as well?'

If there was a place where he could find answers to at least some of these questions, it was the Seeker's tower.

Looking at its crudely drawn image and Cassie's finger pointing to it, Sunny let out a heavy sigh and nodded.

"Alright. Now that there is no other choice… we will explore the tower."

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The tower was just like it had been before… but also a little different. This time, Sunny and the members of the cohort — including Effie — approached it from the northern side. Wind Flower was also shrouded in impenetrable darkness, so the sight of the lonesome spire rising above the forest was even more foreboding.

The light in one of its highest windows seemed even brighter now, shining above the dreadful island like a beacon.

The Seeker's Tower… was not exactly ominous in and of itself. It was not a gargantuan structure like the Crimson Spire or the great ivory pagoda of the Kingdom of Hope. Nor was its architecture particularly menacing — in fact, it was rather beautiful.

The grey tower was perched atop a tall black cliff, airy and austere.

Nevertheless… it emanated a sense of absolute, harrowing threat. Every time Sunny looked at it, he could feel a chill run down his spine.

The frozen figures of terrifying Nightmare Creatures that stood on the bridge did not help one bit. Even now, he was staring at them with a dark expression.

The members of the cohort were doing the same as they hid between the pines.

"Is that… a Great Beast?"

In the sinister silence of the misty forest, Effie's whisper sounded as loud as thunder.

Sunny glanced at her and nodded solemnly.

"Indeed, it is."

One of the abominations caught by the bridge was a towering monstrosity that seemed to be made entirely out of bulging muscles, sharp claws, and harrowing fangs. It was almost unnoticeable in the darkness of the Fragment, but because the light shining from the window reflected from its pale hide, a vague silhouette could be seen.

Effie gulped.

"D—damn…"

That reaction did not surprise Sunny. After all, only a fool would not be scared by a Great Nightmare Creature.

"...I want to eat it so much! It's not fair that only you and Princess got to feast on a Great abomination. That turtle's meat must have tasted heavenly, right?"

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then shook his head.

'Never mind…'

He wouldn't have deemed the gluttonous huntress with an answer, but sadly, his Flaw compelled him to.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny lingered for as long as he could, and then said reluctantly:

"Yeah. It tasted pretty amazing."

In the darkness, Nephis carefully touched his shoulder. When Sunny turned to her, she asked in a low voice:

"What do we do now?"

He studied her beautiful face for a few moments and sighed.

What was there to do?

"We will try to cross the bridge. Right… all of you, prepare to die."

Chapter-1441: Let's Split Up

Although the Seeker's Tower was right in front of them, Sunny had little hope that they would be able to reach its entrance this time. Not only was the tower protected by the eerie enchantment, but the revolution was also close to its end — it had taken them a lot of time to find Effie and get back to the heart of the island.

He did not know how much longer they had, exactly, but it might have been mere minutes.

In the end... they never found out.

The black cliff was surrounded by a wide open space where there were no trees. Not long after the members of the cohort cautiously abandoned the forest, a gentle wind caressed Sunny's face, forcing him to look up.

Wind Flower was shrouded in impenetrable darkness, so no one except for Sunny could see… but there was something there, above them, hiding in the black expanse of the misty sky.

Frozen in terror, he watched dozens of twisting tendrils descending from the turbulent black fog, each hundreds of meters long.

Then, he was dead.

…Coming back to his senses on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Sunny could not help but shudder.

This was the first time he had caught a glimpse of the being that dwelled in the mist above the island. Sunny had thought that Wind Flower had no horrors left to surprise him with… but he had been wrong.

'What is... what even is… that thing?'

Hiding how disturbed he was, Sunny turned and looked at Cassie. By now, he was if not accustomed, then at least familiar with the terrible trauma of dying. The blind girl had only recently become aware of the loop, though. For her, it must have been a harrowing experience.

But, contrary to his expectations, Cassie seemed perfectly fine — nonchalant, even. It was as though she had experienced countless deaths already.

Sunny lingered for a moment.

'Right. Considering her Aspect… she probably has.'

Nevertheless, he walked over to her, hesitated for a moment, and tried to make his voice sound soft:

"Are you alright?"

A brief, pale smile appeared on Cassie's face. She nodded.

"Yes. I'm fine. It's just… it was sobering."

Nephis stared at them silently, a hint of confusion appearing in her tired grey eyes. She was once again suffering from the symptoms of essence exhaustion. Sunny sighed and gestured to Cassie, imploring her to take care of the explanations.

A moment later, he was off to retrieve Jet.

'I am… definitely not avoiding Neph.'

He could have sent Cassie, Nightmare, and one of his shadows into the mist and remain on the Chain Breaker with Nephis instead. However, Sunny was not quite sure how to act around her now, after what the Sin of Solace had said… and what he himself had admitted. Especially not if they were left alone.

'I'll just think about how to get into the terrifying ancient tower. That is much less daunting…'

He explained the situation to Jet on the way back to the Chain Breaker. At the same time, Cassie explained it to Nephis. So, by the

time the four of them reunited, everyone was already aware of what was going on.

But the usual routine had to change from now on.

If they wanted to enter the tower, they couldn't waste time going to the far side of the island and back. There was simply not enough hours in the loop… nevertheless, Sunny hesitated.

How could he leave Effie alone in the cold mist and darkness? He was not sure what had happened to her in the previous revolutions, without them. But knowing what he knew about the island… he doubted that it was something he would want to know.

Sunny remained silent for a while, agonizing over the choice. Then, Nephis suddenly spoke:

"Jet and I can handle that."

He looked at her in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

She leaned over and pointed to them map he had drawn:

"You and Cassie can go to the tower. The two of us will enter the caverns, kill the Terror, find Effie, and hide ourselves away until the end of the loop. Soul Reaper is the key to slaying that thing, anyway, so… we'll manage without you."

Sunny listened to her with a grim expression and shook his head.

"But you know close to nothing about the island. The two of you alone won't be enough, especially with how low on essence you are."

Nephis smiled.

"Who says that we'll be alone? We can take your Onyx Saint and Ravenous Fiend with us. You can also send one of your shadows to tag along. Once you unleash the Shadow Realm Fragment, you'll be able to extend your senses to almost anywhere on the island, right? You can observe where we are and guide us with the help of the

shadow. That will be enough."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

Neph's suggestion had merit. He was still not convinced that they would be able to survive the dread of Wind Flower on their own, but… there was a chance, no matter how small. Sunny would most likely be able to guide them through the forest remotely. Cassie could share senses with either Nephis or Jet, too, to warn him should anything unexpected happen.

In any case, there was not much of a choice. Even though he did not like the idea of sending both members of the cohort who could not remember the past events of the loop blindly into the mist, it was worth trying at least once.

Cassie and Sunny, meanwhile, had the best chance of actually making it inside the tower.

'Ah… I hate it.'

He shifted slightly, then nodded.

"Right… you two go and kill the Cavern Terror, then. If you give it half of the beating you gave me, it might just run away and hide in fear."

Both Nephis and Jet stared at him incredulously. After a few moments of silence, Jet asked:

"...When did we give you a beating?"

Nephis nodded and raised an eyebrow.

"And why?"

Sunny coughed and looked away.

"Oh, that… don't worry about it… it was just a small misunderstanding, a couple revolutions ago… anyway, there's no time to waste! We should hurry if we don't want to be discovered by Undying Slaughter… come on, let's move!"

Soon, they left the Chain Breaker and separated.

Accompanied by Saint and Fiend, Nephis and Jet headed east toward the bone orchard.

Sunny and Cassie, meanwhile, hurried north.

Toward the Seeker's Tower.

Chapter-1442: Elusive Duo

Going straight to the tower might have saved Sunny and Cassie a lot of time, but it was also the most dangerous direction. Not only was Undying Slaughter prowling somewhere in the mist, but Devouring Beast was also not far away.

There were other horrors waiting for them in the forest, as well.

Luckily, there might not have been a more elusive duo than Sunny and Cassie in two worlds. With the blind girl riding Nightmare, they could move swiftly in the darkness. Since she was sharing his senses, they did not need to carry a source of light with them, thus avoiding unnecessary attention.

Sunny could detect most dangers far in advance, and Cassie's supernatural intuition warned them about those threats that could not be perceived that easily. Added to the extensive knowledge of the island, that allowed them to avoid confrontations with its prisoners and advance inland stealthily.

Of course, it would not have been possible without the Fragment of the Shadow Realm. The silent understanding they shared also played a large role.

At some point, Cassie patted Nightmare on the shoulder. The black stallion slowed down and then halted, standing motionlessly in the flowing mist. Sunny leaned against the trunk of an ancient pine and listened to the muffled sounds of the forest, focused and calm.

"Do you sense a threat?"

Cassie nodded.

"Something is approaching."

He swiped the surrounding woods with shadow sense, but did not find anything. Nevertheless… the forest suddenly seemed more eerie than it had been before. Sunny frowned, contemplating which of the horrors of misty island could be lurking nearby.

His expression dimmed.

"Can we evade it?"

The blind girl frowned, then hesitantly shook her head.

"I don't think we can. There is not enough time."

Sunny sighed and raised the Sin of Solace.

"We fight, then."

It was a shame… he really thought that they would be able to reach the Seeker's Tower alive.

Before Sunny could prepare himself for the inevitable — and most likely fatal — clash, Cassie was suddenly surrounded by a whirlwind of sparks. Even the familiar motes of light seemed dimmer in the darkness of the Fragment.

The blind girl remained silent for a few moments, focusing on something, then said quietly:

"We can't evade it, but we can try to lure it away."

Soon, the blade mannequin Echo weaved itself from light and hurried into the mist, intentionally producing a lot of noise. Cassie pointed in a different direction.

"Let's go!"

They rushed away, wanting to create as much distance between themselves and the unseen danger as possible. Sunny kept tracing the Echo with shadow sense… less than a minute later, something strange happened to it.

He still could not sense any movement in the shadows, but the blade

mannequin suddenly halted. Its steel body convulsed, and then slowly rose above the ground, thrashing wildly. One of its arms fell into the moss, shattered and torn. Then, another… this one took a moment more to land.

Soon, pieces of torn metal rained from somewhere very high above. Sunny could not sense the shadow of the clockwork swordsman anymore.

It was simply gone.

A few seconds later, Cassie sighed.

"The Spell just announced that he is destroyed."

Sunny was frowning as he ran. Fortunately, the poor Echo had bought them enough time to slip away from… from whatever it was that had gotten the blade mannequin.

They could have taken a safer, but longer route. Perhaps he had been hasty in his decision to waste as little time as possible.

Despite Sunny's doubts, they did reach the tower alive. Cassie had to sacrifice the sybil Echo, as well, but they made it to the heart of the island in one piece. Standing between the ancient pines at the edge of the killing field that surrounded the black cliff, the two of them remained silent for a while.

Both were remembering the harrowing sight of the long tendrils descending from the mist to harvest their lives.

'That harvester… how do we avoid being noticed by it?'

Sunny had considered flying across the moat before, but now he did not dare to. The bridge seemed to be the only way, but even then… they would be in the open.

'Or we can swim.'

Sunny glanced at the rushing water and suddenly felt a chill running down his spine. Something told him that nothing could return from its depths alive.

He contemplated for a few moments, then sighed.

"I can manipulate the mist to hide us from the... the Harvester. We should be able to reach the bridge unseen."

Cassie tilted her head a little.

"But can we cross the bridge?"

The figures of the frozen Nightmare Creatures suggested otherwise.

Sunny studied the dark silhouettes with a grim expression, then concentrated on the black cliff itself.

"There. There are runes carved into the rock. Do you recognize them?"

If there was indeed an enchantment protecting the tower, then Cassie was the only one who could decipher it. Sunny knew a bit of runic sorcery, as well, but his knowledge of it was nowhere near that of the blind seer.

She did not answer for a while, thinking. Eventually, Cassie frowned.

"It is… hard to say. We can only see a part of the inscription from here. Does it encircle the entire cliff?"

Sunny nodded.

"I've passed the tower from various directions in the past, and every time, I saw these large runes carved into the cliff."

Cassie lingered for a moment.

"Then let's not hurry to reach the bridge yet. We should circle the tower and study the runes first."

They proceed with just that. Staying under the cover of the forest, Sunny and Cassie slowly moved around the black cliff. A few times, they had to retreat and hide — especially so when the familiar sounds of snapping trees resounded from the mist, informing them that Devouring Beast was wandering somewhere nearby.

In the process, both of them observed the progress of the other party tensely. Miraculously… Nephis and Jet emerged from the caverns alive. The two of them must have managed to slay the Corrupted Terror, after all. Judging by how bloodied their armor was, the battle had been a terrible one. Nevertheless, there were no wounds under all that blood — they had already been healed by Nephis.

Saint and Fiend were also in one piece, although the latter seemed worse for wear.

Guided by Sunny's shadow, Neph and Jet were now cautiously traversing the misty forest.

Around the time they found Effie — and were almost impaled on her spear — Sunny and Cassie finally returned to where they had started from. The blind girl dismounted and was now sitting on the ground, tracing unfamiliar runes in the wet soil. There was a frown on her face.

"Strange…"

Sunny waited for a long as he could, then finally asked:

"Well? Can you make sense of them? Is it an enchantment?"

Cassie hesitated for a while.

"It… seems to be. However, it's unlike any enchantment I have ever seen before — here in the Tomb of Ariel, in the Kingdom of Hope, and anywhere across the Dream Realm."

Her expression was suddenly troubled.

"There are runes that do not seem to be a part of the enchantment, as well. The Spell does not translate them, so they are not exactly words. However… they are, in a way. It's like a code. Or a puzzle, I guess?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Can you solve that puzzle?"

Cassie nodded.

"Yes. It's not particularly hard… anyone knowledgeable in runic sorcery would be able to."

He glanced at the black cliff, thought for a few moments, and asked:

"So what do these runes say?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"It's a bit strange. I don't quite understand the meaning, but if I'm reading it correctly... they say…"

Cassie remained silent for a bit, then turned to him and shrugged.

"I am the tower that Aletheia of the Nine built."

Chapter-1443: Cutting a Mountain

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at the blind girl with a strange expression.

'Aletheia… of the Nine?'

The words sounded familiar. He had met a person with a similar name a long, long time ago. The young Awakened swordsman from his First Nightmare, the one whom he called Hero… the Spell had called him Auro of the Nine.

Was it a coincidence, or something more?

Sunny frowned.

What did he really know about Hero?

Not much. Hero had been alive during the twilight of the Golden Age, not long before the Doom War started. He was a soldier of a militant empire which worshiped War God and had conquered many lands. He was a warrior of considerable skill and had already Awakened at his young age…

Now that Sunny knew how long it took one to Awaken without the assistance of the Spell, that fact seemed even more impressive.

But Sunny had known that Auro of the Nine was not a simple person all along. Not because of his skill and talent, but simply because of all the people in the Nightmare, he was the only one whose name the Spell remembered.

That alone told Sunny that Auro was special. The Spell appraised Sunny's performance in the First Nightmare as glorious, which meant

that he had deviated from the natural course of events to a great degree.

What would have happened to Auro if Sunny had never taken the place of the nameless temple slave? The slave would have died, most likely, while the young swordsman would have survived. If he lived on and escaped the mountain pass… what fate would have awaited him in the future?

And there was one more detail…

'What was it that he said to justify killing me?'

Right before their fateful confrontation, Auro had said something peculiar. Something about how he would have gladly faced the Mountain King to let Sunny escape if his life belonged to him alone. But it did not, because the young swordsman had sworn to fulfill an… an unencompassable duty of some sort. He couldn't allow himself to die because of it.

What was the duty Auro had spoken of?

And why was the name of another person of the Nine inscribed on the base of the Seeker's Tower?

Who were the Nine?

Sunny took a deep breath and glanced at Cassie.

"What do you think it means?"

The blind girl remained silent for a moment.

"Aletheia must be the name of the Seeker who used to live on this island. He or she was proficient in sorcery, it seems. Other than that, it's hard to say."

Sunny sighed.

"Have you ever heard of the Nine?"

He did not really expect a positive answer, but to his surprise, Cassie

hesitantly nodded.

"I might have. If I remember correctly, Nephis mentioned once that she had met someone with the same title."

Sunny blinked.

'Huh?'

How would Neph have met one of the Nine?

'It must have been in her Second Nightmare.'

If that was the case, then these Nine seemed to have a habit of popping up in many Nightmares. Just who were they?

Or had been, more precisely.

Shaking his head, Sunny made a mental note to ask Nephis about the person she had met, and turned his attention to the tower.

"Alright. So, this Aletheia was the master of Wind Flower, and left a powerful enchantment to protect the tower…"

Cassie shook her head lightly.

"The island might not have been called Wind Flower back then. It's just a name by which people of Fallen Grace call it today. When the Seeker resided here, it was probably called Aletheia's Island or something like that."

Sunny shrugged.

"Whatever. In any case… how do we break the enchantment?"

He thought for a few moments, then asked:

"Will destroying some of the runes work?"

Cassie remained silent for a while.

"Not just any runes. But if the key ones are erased, the enchantment will fall apart. I can identify the ones we need to destroy…"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you said that you couldn't make sense of this strange enchantment."

The blind girl smiled.

"That's true. I wouldn't be able to recreate it… but breaking it is much easier than that. Nevertheless, don't be too encouraged. The runes are carved deep, and there are certainly measures in place to protect them. We'll have to shatter the entire slope of the cliff to erase them."

He chuckled.

"Leave that to me. I might not be able to cut a mountain with one slash of my sword, but breaking a cliff or two shouldn't be a problem."

Cassie nodded and fell silent, concentrating on identifying the key runes of the enchantment. Sunny, meanwhile, studied the black cliff.

A long time passed. On the far side of the island, Nephis, Jet, and Effie had hidden among the cliffs and shared a meal. Sunny watched them through the shadow and listened to the calming flow of their conversation. Neph was holding the Guiding Light, explaining how it had been found in the lost temple of Fallen Grace.

Finally, Cassie was done with her task. The two of them moved stealthily around the black cliff and reached the spot where the string of most vulnerable runes was located.

"There. Destroy that section."

She pointed to where Sunny needed to strike, but he shook his head.

"Not yet."

They had to wait a little longer.

After about an hour, Sunny took a deep breath and rose. A whirlwind of scarlet sparks danced around his hand, forming into a black bow.

He raised it and held the string.

At the same time, somewhere outside the mist, the seven suns were plunging into the Great River. It was dusk.

As the Crown of Twilight opened his soul to a flood of essence, Sunny drew the bow and activated its most powerful enchantment, [Death Dealer]. Usually, he would not have been able to use it more than a few times in a row — the strain on his essence reserves was simply too great.

But right now, it did not matter.

Releasing the string, he sent a black arrow flying. Then, without wasting even a second, Sunny grunted and drew the bow again. The second and third arrows streaked through the darkness before the first one even hit the target.

Then, the silence of Wind Flower suddenly exploded into a deafening roar of breaking stone. It was as though a furious storm suddenly descended, with booming thunderclaps shaking the world.

Black arrows struck the face of the cliff one after another… one, two, three, ten. Despite how harrowing the force of these strikes was, the weathered black rock held.

For a while.

Gradually, a net of thin cracks appeared on its surface. Then, the cracks widened. Not long after that, small shards of broken stone shot into the air.

Finally, the side of the cliff exploded and collapsed, tons of black stone falling into the turbulent waters of the wide moat.

Sunny lowered his bow and swayed a little, utterly spent. His breathing was ragged.

By his side, Cassie clenched her delicate fists in excitement.

"It… it worked! The enchantment is failing!"

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"Yeah… I can see. Crap."

There was no thrill in his voice.

Out there on the bridge… the harrowing abominations that had been motionless before were already starting to move.

Chapter-1444: New Ways to Die

Not only were the Nightmare Creatures on the bridge coming back to life, but the thunderous noise created by Sunny's arrows had to have attracted all kinds of abominations from the depths of the island. The enchantment surrounding Aletheia's Tower might have been destroyed, but the situation was dire.

He could already hear the pines falling in the forest, which meant that Devoring Beast was approaching them.

'Damnation.'

Sunny stared at the stirring Nightmare Creatures for a moment, then dismissed his bow and dashed to Cassie.

"Sorry!"

Grabbing the blind girl by her thin waist, he effortlessly lifted her off the ground and jumped into the saddle. A moment later, Nightmare had already left the cover of the trees and was flying toward the bridge.

"S—Sunny?! W—what…"

The mist boiled and surged into the killing field, obscuring the swift silhouette of the black stallion. Sunny hoped that this would protect them from the being that hid in the skies… but he couldn't be sure.

Pressing Cassie against himself so that she was not thrown off Nightmare's back, he readied the Sin of Solace.

"Either we get inside the tower, or die. So… hold on tight!"

The abominations on the bridge had already caught their scent. Sunny had hoped to slip past them before the creatures fully regained

their senses, but it seemed that he had been too optimistic. There was only a second or two left before Nightmare reached the moat… and yet, there was already a Great Nightmare Creature eyeing them as it blocked the way.

'Curse it!'

At the last second, Sunny gave his steed a command to turn left.

At the same time, the deep darkness surrounding them stirred and came alive, surging forward like a tide. Just when Nightmare would have plunged into the rushing water, the darkness solidified, turning into a tangible surface.

A bridge built of shadow had appeared to the side of the stone bridge, and they were already crossing it. Sunny saw something fly at him from the direction of the Great abomination and lashed out with the Sin of Solace — the impact was powerful enough to almost tear his arm off, but he did manage to deflect it.

A moment later, they were past the Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny even imagined that they could actually make it…

But then, something was wrong.

The further Nightmare advanced across the moat, the worse Sunny felt. His body had somehow turned weak and frail. His thoughts turned cloudy…

'What… what is happening?'

Cassie's golden hair, which was flying into his face a moment before, was now white for some reason. Pressed against him, her body felt unnaturally thin and fragile.

The Sin of Solace slid out of his grip and fell into the water.

Looking down in confusion, Sunny stared at his hand. His skin had turned wrinkly and translucent, like that of an old man… it was just like Ananke's hand when he had first seen her.

His teeth felt loose in his gums, as if ready to fall out.

"Sunny…"

Cassie's faint voice was almost too quiet to hear.

The other side of the moat was so close.

But before they could reach it, Sunny's vision suddenly turned blurry.

Then, he was standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker once again.

Turning slowly, Sunny looked at Cassie. The blind girl was standing behind him, shivering. Her beautiful face was deathly pale, but her hair…

It was golden once again.

He slumped against the railing, let out a shaky breath, and forced out a smile.

"I guess… we really do have to use the bridge."

She nodded slowly.

"Yes. Let's… try to make it, this time."

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Sunny had always wanted to die of old age, but definitely not in such a cruel manner. It seemed that his previous suspicion that diving into the moat would be lethal was correct — however, as it turned out, passing above it was just as deadly.

'At least now, I know that Masters can die of old age, too.'

It was actually an interesting piece of information. It was common knowledge that Awakened had longer lifespans than mundane humans, but no one really knew by how much. The Spell had only descended on the waking world around half a century ago, after all, and it took a while for the first Ascended to appear. The first Saints appeared even later, after Sunny had been born.

'I'll put it in my exploration report… if we ever make it out alive…'

Not letting the eerie death slow them down, Sunny and Cassie made another attempt to enter Aletheia's Tower.

In the end, it took them a dozen more revolutions to succeed. Getting near the water flowing in the moat was a death sentence, since time around it went utterly insane. Flying was suicidal because of the Harvester. So, the only way to reach the black cliff was to cross the stone bridge.

However, the Nightmare Creatures trapped on it were too deadly. As soon as the enchantment was destroyed, they were released from its hold and turned their attention to the two humans. Sunny and Cassie tried fighting them, and perished. Then, they tried to evade them, but were caught and killed.

Eventually, it was Sunny who came up with a way to deal with the abominations. With Devouring Beast on their heels and the Nightmare Creatures in front of him, he simply made sure that the former and the latter collided with each other before they caught him and Cassie.

Then, while the bestial giantess was dismantling the dreadful abominations behind them, Sunny and Cassie stealthily ascended the steps cut into the cliff. There was more deadly magic on those steps, but after dying to it several times, they finally found a way to reach the tower.

Finally, they stood in front of its gates. They were shut tightly, and even if Sunny had a key, there was no lock to insert it. Luckily, he was already familiar with this type of door. Placing his hand on the surface of the gate, he sent his essence flowing into it.

The ancient door opened slowly.

Hearing a furious roar chase after them from the bottom of the cliff, Sunny did not waste any time. Grabbing Cassie's hand, he entered Aletheia's Tower and pulled the blind girl inside.

Chapter-1445: Inside the Tower

As soon as Sunny shut the gate behind them, the terrifying roar that had been approaching was cut off. A few moments later, the tower seemed to shake a little, as if something had crashed into its walls.

However, apart from a little dust that fell from the ceiling, nothing happened. They seemed to be safe.

…From the threats outside, at least.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Sunny took a step back and looked around.

His eyes narrowed a little.

"Well, that… is unexpected."

He had wondered about what the interior of Aletheia's Tower would look like a lot. In his mind, there were two possibilities… either it would be perfectly preserved and full of tantalizing knowledge, or serve as the lair for the most harrowing abomination yet.

The truth was that it was both and neither at the same time.

From what Sunny could tell, the interior of the tower had once been austere, but elegant. None of that elegance remained, however — at some point, a dreadful Nightmare Creature had made its way inside.

He was currently staring at that Nightmare Creature.

Its torso was hanging from the ceiling, terribly mutilated and seeping with black blood. The creature's revolting skull was crushed, and one of its arms was severed at the elbow. A vast and utterly disgusting puddle of blood, viscera, and brain matter covered most of the floor.

Looking at the corpse of the gargantuan, vaguely humanoid creature,

Sunny couldn't help but feel a sense of deep, primal terror.

Aletheia's Tower had indeed become the lair of a dreadful abomination…

However, the abomination was dead.

Cassie was observing the corpse, too. She seemed unnerved.

After hesitating for a few moments, the blind girl said quietly:

"It's… it was a Great Tyrant."

Sunny gulped.

"Why… the hell… is there a Great Tyrant in our Third Nightmare, even? That has to be against the rules."

And why was there something capable of mutilating a Great Tyrant to such a degree here, as well?

What was that damned Spell thinking?

Shaking his head, Sunny studied their surroundings. Now that he had some time, he noticed signs of a terrible battle. Everything inside the tower had been obliterated, turning into piles of splinters and rubble. Here and there, the corpses of the Tyrant's minions could be seen, turned into bloody mush.

Was the thing that had killed them still inside? It had to be, considering the nature of the loop…

But then, why were the gates of the tower locked? Why was the enchantment intact?

How was it even possible?

Walking over to the puddle of the Tyrant's blood, Sunny knelt and touched it. His expression was troubled.

"It's cold."

The creature had not been killed recently. Had it been dead for as

long as the loop existed?

He glanced at Cassie.

"What does your intuition tell you?"

She frowned.

"...To flee."

Then, the blind girl sighed and pointed up.

"There is danger, somewhere above us."

Sunny grimaced and rose to his feet. He considered summoning Nightmare back, but then decided against it. The black steed would not be able to move freely in the narrow confines of the tower, so…

It was up to him and Cassie to find out the truth.

"Well, I am not going to flee after dying so many damned times to get here."

She nodded.

"I agree."

Trying to stay away from the dreadful corpse, they found the stairs and cautiously ascended to the next floor of the tower. There, they saw more signs of the battle that had taken place here.

In fact, it seemed that the clash between the Tyrant and whatever it was that had killed it had mostly taken place on the higher floors. Sunny could tell just by looking up — starting from the second floor, there were no ceilings anymore. Tall piles of stone debris were all around them.

It seemed that the Great Tyrant had crashed through the floors of many levels before finally ending up hanging dead from the ceiling of the first one. Sadly, most of the interior of the tower had been destroyed in the process.

Sunny glanced at Cassie, then sighed and started climbing. The blind girl followed by holding the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, which gently lifted her in the air.

They slowly ascended past the destroyed portion of the tower before finally arriving at the second-to-last level. Here, a chunk of the floor still remained, leading to a narrow staircase. The battle seemed to have never reached the last level, so the ceiling was intact.

Sunny could not tell what was above them… but he knew only the highest window of the tower was emanating light. So, the source of that light had to be on the last floor.

The source of the terrible danger Cassie felt was also there.

"Stay behind me."

Moving forward to protect the blind girl with his body, Sunny put his foot on the first step and started ascending the stairs. He felt wary and apprehensive… scared, even. After experiencing so many painful deaths, it was only natural for his body to be afraid of another one. Even if he understood that he would be brought back to life by the loop, his body didn't.

'Let's just get it over with.'

Arriving in front of an engraved wooden door, Sunny hesitated for a moment, then sighed and opened it.

Bright light washed over him the next instant.

…There was a faint smell of incense in the air.

Taking a step forward, Sunny shielded his eyes with a hand and extended his shadow sense forward. He had expected to find a dreadful abomination waiting for the inside… but, to his surprise, there was no movement at all.

Lowering his hand, he looked at the final floor of Aletheia's tower.

It consisted of one large chamber. There were lanterns floating in the air all around it, emanating a warm glow. A pleasant smell of incense

permeated the air.

The interior of the chamber was perfectly intact. A few pieces of simple, but tasteful wooden furniture stood on the tiled floor.

"Sunny."

Cassie pointed to the far side of the spacious room.

There, a wide bed stood, surrounded by a half-transparent silk canopy.

And on that bed…

A beautiful woman in an archaic robe was laying, her chest rising and falling steadily.

She was fast asleep.

Chapter-1446: Wind Flower

Both Sunny and Cassie froze, bewildered by the strange scene.

'Surely, I'm seeing things.'

This was Wind Flower, a misty hell where harrowing abominations and Defiled Saints were imprisoned, not even knowing that they were. A place that slowly devoured the souls of Great Nightmare Creatures until there was nothing left but empty husks. The abandoned stronghold of an ancient Seeker who had left to challenge the Estuary.

How could there be someone sleeping soundly in its very heart?

Sunny suppressed the desire to pinch himself.

…He also suppressed the desire to pinch Cassie.

"Hey… you see what I see, right?"

As soon as he spoke, Sunny suddenly felt a wave of fear wash over him and covered his mouth with a hand. Shaking off his bewilderment, he reminded himself where they were, and why they had come here.

Cassie had said that there was a source of terrible danger at the top of Aletheia's Tower… but there was only this sleeping woman. Which meant that she was that source.

What if his voice woke her up?

The blind girl nodded slowly and answered in a whisper:

"I do."

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

"Is this… Aletheia?"

Indeed, that would be the most rational guess. They were standing in the tower built by Aletheia of the Nine, after all. So who else could it be?

Cassie shook her head.

"It… shouldn't be. The Seeker who lived on this island is said to have left it a long, long time ago. Before the Defilement was even born. Of course, the information I received from the people of Fallen Grace might be wrong…"

She frowned.

"But it is said that only the Serpent King has been able to come to Wind Flower and return alive. I… honestly don't see how any human could have survived this place, let alone how they would have ended up sleeping peacefully at the top floor of this tower."

Sunny studied the figure of the sleeping woman tensely, then rubbed his face tiredly.

"Then who the hell is she?"

The blind girl remained silent for a while.

Eventually, though, she answered:

"Actually, I have a theory."

Cassie hesitated for a moment, then said:

"I think… I think she is Wind Flower."

Sunny stared at her in confusion.

"What do you mean? She is a personification of this island?"

The blind girl shook her head.

"No… remember, nobody knows where the name Wind Flower came from. However, I noticed something strange about the Guiding Light.

It continued pointing to the center of the island even after we landed, right?"

Sunny nodded.

Cassie sighed.

"I was also able to make it point to you, Neph, and Effie. But not Jet. I puzzled over how it worked for a long time… and after a while, I started to suspect that it's because Jet doesn't have a True Name. Or at least I don't know what her True Name is."

Indeed, Soul Reaper was simply Jet's nickname, not her True Name. Actually, even Sunny did not know if she had one.

The blind girl, meanwhile, continued:

"I got that idea, actually, after we saw Devouring Beast. The Guiding Light only points to Effie, and not her. That is strange, considering that they are the same person. Only… I think that once somebody becomes Corrupted, their very nature start to change. So, they lose their True Name, or maybe it changes as well."

She studied the walls of the spacious chamber and said:

"I think that if we had the Guiding Light and asked it to point us to Wind Flower… it would have pointed directly at this woman."

Sunny frowned, then asked quietly:

"Alright. Let's say that you are correct… still, the question remains. Who the hell is this Wind Flower?"

Cassie suddenly coughed and looked away in embarrassment.

"That, uh… I don't know."

He stared at her in confusion.

'Then why the hell did she go on and on about the Guiding Light, True Names, and all that? We are exactly where we started this conversation!'

Shaking his head, he took a deep breath and asked:

"So… what do we do now? We wanted to come here to find a way to escape Wind Flower… Aletheia's Island… whatever this place is actually called. Do we just wake her up and hope that she's not some terrifying Defiled abomination?"

Cassie shook her head.

"She's not Defiled. She is a Transcendent human... a Saint."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How do you know?"

The blind girl raised an eyebrow.

"How do you not know? I used my Dormant Ability to read her runes. You can do… whatever it is you do to look inside people."

He blinked a couple of times.

Right… he could do that.

Shifting his perception, he peered into the soul of the sleeping woman. She had a single radiant core, its brightness similar in intensity to that of a fully saturated Transcendent soul core.

However…

His expression dimmed.

At the very heart of the beautiful radiance, almost unnoticeable… there was a tiny seed of encroaching darkness. It was small and insignificant, for now. But Sunny knew that it would grow.

Because that was how Corruption was. It spread and consumed everything, until there was nothing pure left.

The woman might not be Defiled yet, but she was going to be soon.

'...She won't, though.'

The thought appeared in Sunny's mind almost on its own. He contemplated its meaning for a few moments, then tilted his head slightly.

'Right. She won't.'

For as long as the woman remained on Aletheia's Island, inside the loop, she was not going to be Corrupted — if she could hold out for a single day. At the end of the day, the time would rewind itself, and whatever progress the vile darkness had made would be erased.

Therefore…

For her, this island was like a sanctuary.

Was that why she was here? It had to be.

'But who is she?!'

Sunny sighed, then looked at Cassie and hesitated for a moment.

"So… are we really going to wake her up?"

The blind girl shrugged.

"What's the worst that can happen?"

Sunny stared at her with wide eyes.

"What? Why on Earth would you say that?! You of all people should know not to…"

He suddenly fell silent, afraid that his furious whisper would wake up the sleeping woman.

However, he did not have to worry.

She remained peacefully asleep.

In fact, nothing they did seemed to wake her up. By the time the revolution ended, it had become apparent that the mysterious woman's slumber was not a natural one.

Instead, it seemed... eternal.

Chapter-1447: Different Approach

"So, what do we do now?"

The cohort was hidden between the cliffs on the northern side of the island. Effie was pillaging the Covetous Coffer while Jet and Nephis sat tiredly on the ground. They had taken point in the battle against the Cavern Terror, but strangely enough, Sunny and Cassie seemed more drained.

The blind girl shook her head in dejection.

"I'm… not sure."

They had just shared their findings. The method to infiltrate Aletheia's Tower, the remains of a slain Great Tyrant, the sleeping woman on the top floor… and how they had failed to wake her up.

Sunny was in a grim mood. They had wasted so much time and effort, but had nothing to show for it. The escape from the island seemed just as impossible as it had before.

'Curse it.'

He remained silent for a few moments, then glanced at Nephis.

There was something gnawing at him.

"Cassie said that you've met one of the Nine?"

That question held no real importance for their current situation, but he felt curious. Perhaps knowing more about the former master of the island could help them think of a new solution.

Neph looked at him with a hint of surprise.

"Yes, I did."

Sunny did not react much to her confirmation.

"Was it in your Second Nightmare?"

He was more or less certain of it, but, unexpectedly, Nephis shook her head.

"No… I met him in the Nightmare Desert."

Everyone was confused by her answer — Effie and Jet because they did not know who the Nine were, Sunny and Cassie because they did.

How could a person from the ancient past of the Dream Realm be alive in the present day?

Noticing their confusion, Nephis explained:

"When I first entered the Nightmare Desert, I found two skeletons nailed to a mystical tree. One called himself Azarax the Mighty, and the other called himself Eurys of the Nine. I got the impression that they were left on that tree as punishment."

She paused for a moment, then added quietly:

"That Eurys, he told me that he was a humble slave who had angered the gods by slitting the throat of one of them. I'm not sure if his words can be trusted, though… to me, it seemed like he had been a high-ranking soldier of the Demon Army. In any case, I took him off the tree, and he guided me to the Underworld. We parted not long before I entered the Nightmare."

Sunny stared at her in bewilderment.

'Well, that… is a wild story. Two talking skeletons nailed to a tree? Sure, the Nightmare Desert is full of old bones that refuse to stay dead. However, none of those I've seen ever spoke to me.'

For a moment, he remembered visiting Neph's dream right after she had returned from her Second Nightmare. Had there not been a terrible tree there, with two figures cruelly nailed to its trunk?

'And what was it about slitting a god's throat? Surely, that was a play on words…'

Right?

'Interesting.'

Auro had been a soldier of the War God's empire. However, this Eurys seemed to have participated in the Doom War on the side of the daemons. Aletheia, meanwhile, had come to the Tomb of Ariel — perhaps the only place where the war had never reached.

Just what was he supposed to make of it?

If there was one unfortunate conclusion Sunny had to make… it was that knowing about Eurys of the Nine did not help him at all.

Aletheia's Island still seemed inescapable. The tower, which had been their hope for the last dozen or so revolutions, seemed to be a dead end.

Cassie let out a heavy sigh.

"We should probably try to wake up that woman again. If nothing helps… although I don't like it, we might want to try attacking her."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"You want to kill her?"

The blind girl frowned, remained silent for a few moments, then said quietly:

"If that is what it takes, I do."

He was somewhat surprised. Cassie… had changed more than he had thought. The shy girl he had known on the Forgotten Shore would have never thought of killing a bystander without provocation, even if it could help her.

Or rather, she would not have thought of it if given another choice.

'Well, why am I surprised?'

The past years had changed all of them. Sunny was not the same person he had been on the Forgotten Shore… he hoped that it was for the best. Cassie would not have stayed the same, either.

He sighed.

"Actually, we don't need to wake her."

Everyone looked at him questioningly. After a few moments of silence, Nephis shifted slightly:

"Do you mean…"

Sunny nodded. He had visited Neph's dream once… so he could visit the sleeping woman's dreams, as well. That way, they would not need to wake her.

It was all thanks to Nightmare and one of his Abilities, [Dreamwalker]. It allowed the dreadful steed to travel through dreams… and take his master with him.

"Yeah. I can get Nightmare to transport me into this woman's dreams. Perhaps she will tell me something that can help us escape the island."

The others looked at him somberly. After a while, Jet asked:

"Are you sure you want to visit the mind of a Saint who is slowly being Corrupted, Sunny? It… might be dangerous."

Effie, nodded.

"Listen, Sunny… I'm sure that you've visited the dreams of many a young lady even without the help of that scary horse of yours, but this is different. This Defilement, you guys think that it spreads simply through knowing a secret, right? What if you learn that secret in her dream?"

Sunny shrugged.

"It's not that I want to do it, it's that I have to. Don't worry… too much. I'll be careful."

He still had the Mirror of Truth. If push came to shove, he would use it to copy Neph's [Longing] and get Nightmare to carry him away from the mysterious Saint's dream as fast as possible.

It… actually sounded like a plan.

He nodded.

"Then it's decided. Cassie and I will go to Aletheia's Tower again come the next revolution."

'And hopefully, this time, we won't leave empty-handed.'

Chapter-1448: A Beautiful Dream

Finding themselves back on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Cassie and Sunny did not waste any time. After bringing Jet back, they sent her and Nephis to find Effie. Then, they hurried toward Aletheia's Tower.

By now, traversing this area of the misty forest had become a routine for then. They knew just where to go, and when. Nevertheless, both of Cassie's Echoes had to be sacrificed along the way.

Now that they did not have to study the runes cut into the black cliff, there was even some time to rest while they waited for dusk. Hidden away from the killing field surrounding the tower, they shared a haphazard meal and waited.

Sunny studied Cassie's face in the darkness. She seemed calm and collected… but he knew that she had to be struggling to stay sane just as much as he had struggled after living through his own first few revolutions.

Aletheia's Island… was just too cruel and harrowing of a hell. In fact, Sunny was not sure what his mental state would have been if Cassie had not joined him in the knowledge of the loop. Having someone steady to share the burden… was truly a blessing.

Perhaps that was the reason the blind girl seemed less affected by the gruesome things they had lived through here. Unlike him, she had always had a partner to support her.

Still…

He hesitated for a moment, then asked:

"How are you doing?"

Cassie smiled.

Her smile was faint and fleeting, just like it had been ever since their meeting in Fallen Grace.

"I am fine."

Sunny wanted her to say more, but Cassie kept herself closed off. It was strange, really… there had been a time when they were close as siblings, and a time when they were like strangers. The ice between them thawed eventually, but it took Sunny a long time to want to mend their relationship. Now that he was trying, though… Cassie seemed unwilling.

He simply did not know what was happening in that head of hers. Actually, he suspected that no one knew — even Nephis, who was the closest to the blind girl, could not tell what Cassie was thinking.

Perhaps that was the curse of being a seer.

Sunny sighed.

'I am way too oblivious about these things to navigate through such a mess.'

But he had to try, at least.

"Well, if you want to talk about it, I'm here."

Cassie nodded.

"Thank you. It means a lot."

However, it seemed as if she was thinking about something else.

Shaking his head slightly, Sunny rose and summoned his bow.

"It's almost time."

They destroyed the enchantment protecting Aletheia's tower, led Devouring Beast to the released Nightmare Creatures, and slipped past them. Ascending the stone steps, they opened the gate of the

tower and hid inside, then climbed to its top floor.

Finally, Sunny and Cassie arrived at Wind Flower's chamber.

Everything here was the same. Calling upon Nightmare, Sunny approached the perfectly preserved bed and looked at the woman sleeping on it through the half-transparent canopy.

The mysterious Saint… was a rare beauty, without a doubt. Her dark skin was smooth and dewy, without a single blemish on it. The lines of her exquisite face were soft and lovely. Her wavy hair was like glistening black silk, while her archaic robe was of a rich azure color, with vivid white accents.

As she dreamt, her expression was vulnerable and innocent. It was… a captivating sight. Sunny found it hard not to let his heart be moved as he looked at the sleeping beauty.

The world itself seemed warmer and softer around her, as if caressed by a gentle wind.

He sighed.

"I'm going. Cassie, you… stay safe. Please."

With that, he took a step back and dissolved into the shadows. Nightmare was already waiting for him in their embrace — his vast form wrapped itself around Sunny, and then…

They were somewhere else.

And yet, they were exactly where they had been.

Sunny was still on the top floor of Aletheia's Tower. However, it looked different.

The wide bed was empty. Cassie was nowhere to be seen. The floating lanterns were gone. Instead, the chamber was drowned in bright light that poured through the windows — Nightmare had to hide in the deep shadows in the corner of the spacious room to avoid it.

'That's… not right.'

Since when was Aletheia's Island so bright?

Wary, Sunny slowly walked to the window and looked outside.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

Below him… was the familiar island. However, it had changed entirely. The suffocating mist was gone, revealing the beautiful green expanse of the pine forest. The trees bathed in warm sunlight, swaying slightly in the wind. Here and there, clear streams flowed. The killing field surrounding the tower was drowning in flowers.

The stone bridge was empty, with no Nightmare Creatures in sight. In fact… without the mist, Sunny was supposed to see the towering figure of Devouring Beast wandering the forest. However, she was nowhere to be seen.

There was no harrowing creature in the clear blue sky, either. Aletheia's Island… seemed utterly devoid of danger. Instead, it seemed like a tranquil, beautiful, and peaceful place.

A paradise.

'This… is her dream?'

Sunny knew that he was inside a dream. However, the space around him did not seem like one. It was much more solid, defined, and permanent than the few dreams he had visited in the past.

'What the hell is going on?'

"It's a wonderful day, isn't it?"

That voice…

Sunny flinched and turned around.

A woman had just entered the chamber, carrying a bouquet of fresh flowers. It was her… the beautiful sleeping Saint of Aletheia's Tower.

She was awake. Or rather… in her dream, she was.

Sunny took an involuntary step back. Despite how lovely the woman was, he couldn't help but feel wary of her.

His voice was slightly hoarse:

"Who are you?"

The beautiful Saint raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Me? I am Wind Flower."

Then, a hint of amusement appeared on her charming face.

"But why are you asking? And why… are you here again?"

Chapter-1449: Left Behind

'Wind Flower…'

So Cassie was right. Wind Flower was the True Name of the mysterious Saint in front of him, and after the memories of the original master of the island — Aletheia — had disappeared from the memory of the River People, they started calling this place after its current resident.

In time, even that knowledge was erased by time and the collapse of the River People civilization. All that remained was a name that had lost all meaning.

Everyone who remembered Wind Flower were gone, and yet, the person to whom that name belonged remained. Trapped in a dream that lay in the heart of Aletheia's Island.

However…

Sunny was caught by surprise because of something else the beautiful Saint said. He suppressed the desire to take another step back, frowned, and said tensely:

"I am asking because I don't know, and I am here in hope of finding a way to escape this island. But… again? Why did you say that I am here again?"

Wind Flower studied his face for a few moments, still smiling. Her gaze lingered at the Crown of Twilight, then shifted away.

Letting out a melodious chuckle, she walked to a beautiful porcelain vase and put the bouquet of wild flowers she had been holding inside. Then, she let out a sigh.

"I see. This is our first meeting. How exciting!"

Sunny was not convinced. Why would Wind Flower act as though she had recognized him? It could only mean one of two things…

He hesitated for a moment.

"Are you not affected by the loop?"

She shrugged.

"My body is, but my consciousness isn't. Here in this dream palace, I am free to live my days in peace."

Her smile dimmed a little, and a hint of darkness appeared in her beautiful azure eyes.

"I must admit, though… young man, you have rather poor manners. Not only have you intruded upon a lady's dream without an invitation, but you've also neglected to introduce yourself. I feel at a disadvantage."

Sunny coughed.

"Ah… please accept my sincere apology, Saint Wind Flower. I'm not exactly familiar with the etiquette of visiting people's dreams. My name is Sunless."

'If she is not beholden to the loop…'

Then she had indeed met Sunny before. Which, of course, was impossible — this was definitely his first time entering the… the Dream Palace where Wind Flower's soul resided.

Either Sunny had spent much longer on Aletheia's Island than he had suspected, somehow losing his memories of becoming aware of the loop the first time around… or she had mistaken him for the Mad Prince.

The latter was much more probable, and also meant that the odious madman had visited the island in the past.

But why? And what had he spoken with Wind Flower about? What was the bastard scheming?

Mysterious, mysterious… all of it was so mysterious! Sunny had so many questions!

But would Wind Flower answer his questions? Was she a friend, or was she a foe?

He hesitated.

The beautiful Saint, meanwhile, looked at him in confusion.

"...Saint Wind Flower? Why do you call me a saint?"

Sunny blinked.

'Right…'

The people of the waking world used the word "Saint" to denote those Awakened who had conquered the Third Nightmare and Transcended. A native of the Dream Realm would not recognize the term.

He scratched his head.

"It's just what my people call Transcendents. A… a honorific, I guess."

Wind Flower smiled.

"Ah. I see. Well, Sunless… it is very nice to meet you. You are the second person to visit me in all this time. Very few beings possess the ability to travel through dreams, you know."

Sunny nodded.

"To be fair, I don't possess such an Ability. It's my horse who does."

Wind Flower looked into the corner where Nightmare was hiding among the shadows. Her pleasant smile widened a little.

"I've noticed. It's certainly extravagant, to use a Terror as a steed. You must be quite powerful to have the loyalty of such a creature, Sunless. And to wear that crown."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then briefly touched the Crown of

Twilight. His expression was complicated.

Did she know what the Crown of Twilight was because she had seen the Mad Prince wear it?

He asked cautiously:

"You recognize it, my lady?"

The beautiful Saint studied him for a while, a small smile playing on her soft lips.

Then, she laughed.

"How could I not? Ah, let me introduce myself properly — I am Wind Flower of the Twilight Sea. King Daeron, the Serpent King, is my father. Or rather, he was… considering that you are wearing the Memory of his crown, Sunless, he must have died by your hand."

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Time seemed to slow down for Sunny. He stared at the beautiful Saint... the princess... silently, not knowing what to do.

'So… I am her father's killer…'

That was not ideal, to say the least. He had already been wary of Wind Flower, and knowing that there was blood between them only made that wariness grow. Who would want to stand in front of a mysterious, partially Corrupted Saint after slaying her father?

Of course, Daeron of the Twilight Sea had already succumbed to Corruption himself by the time Sunny killed him, so there was no rational reason for the enchanting princess to hate him.

But when had people even been rational?

'Wait a minute…'

There was another revelation in what she had said. Wind Flower easily identified the Crown of Twilight as a Memory… which meant that she knew about the Spell. Was its carrier, most likely.

Sunny's eyes narrowed.

'Well, of course she is.'

If she was Daeron's daughter, then she was not one of the River People. Instead, she was a challenger of this Nightmare, just like Sunny. No, not quite… only Masters could challenge the Third Nightmare. And since she was a Saint, she had either achieved Transcendence inside the Tomb of Ariel… or had come inside with her father, in order to guide the future challengers with him.

Noticing Sunny's unease, Wind Flower smiled.

"I see you are starting to get it. Indeed, I am not the real Princess Wind Flower. I am merely a copy of her, conjured by the Nightmare Spell. She… is long dead by now, I think. And yet, I remain."

Sunny's face paled.

This was the first time he had met an inhabitant of a Nightmare who was aware of their nature. He didn't quite know how to behave in front of her.

Was this Wind Flower dead or alive? Was she real or not? Was she a mere echo of a real person, or a true living being created by the Spell for the duration of the Nightmare?

Wind Flower sighed, glanced at the Crown of Twilight one more time, and walked over to the window. Gazing at the beautiful vista of this dreamy version of Aletheia's Island, she spoke:

"Back then, my father and his most loyal warriors braved the White Desert and entered the Tomb of Ariel. I was one of them. Our goal was to imprint our souls into the Great River, so that when challengers entered this Nightmare, there was someone to help them conquer it."

She sighed lightly.

"It was a gamble, of course… a desperate one, considering that our world was dying. It was already being consumed by the Dream Realm, and despite all our struggles, we had failed to rise to the

challenge of the Spell. My father was the only Supreme of our people, and there was not going to be another. At least not in time to turn the tide of destruction.

So… he came up with a plan to raise an army of Transcendent warriors in this unique Nightmare."

Wind Flower's shoulders fell.

"...That plan failed, as well."

Sunny was staring at her with wide eyes, his thoughts in turmoil.

'What… wait…'

Taking a step forward, he raised his hands and asked, his voice hoarse:

"Wait… your world? Being consumed by the Dream Realm? What do you mean?"

The beautiful Saint turned and looked at him in surprise. Her enchanting azure eyes were full of confusion.

Then, she smiled.

Shaking her head, Wind Flower chuckled and said, her words sending Sunny's mind reeling:

"What… did you think that yours was the only world that the Nightmare Spell infected, Sunless? Of course not. There were others. Yours is not the first…"

She lingered for a moment, then added with a hint of amusement:

"However, it will be the last."

Chapter-1450: Seventh Realm

Sunny was reeling from the sudden deluge of impossible knowledge that Wind Flower had so casually shared with him. The relationship between the waking world and the Dream Realm... the vague theories about the Nightmare Spell he and Nephis had discussed... everything he knew was suddenly upturned.

He remained silent for a while, then weakly raised a hand, summoned the Shadow Chair, and sat down.

Watching him, the beautiful Saint tilted her head slightly and laughed.

"What an interesting Memory…"

Walking away from the window, she found a chair of her own, then picked up an elegant porcelain kettle and poured fragrant tea into two cups.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"I… I did think that my world — we call it the waking world — was the only one infected by Nightmare Spell. Oh, I was never sure, though."

Wind Flower pushed one of the cups toward him and shook her head.

"It seems that your people are less knowledgeable about the past than mine were. Ah, but we were rather ignorant, as well. Still, we knew that there were many realms before the End War. Some were connected to each other, some were far apart. Some were considered mortal realms, while some were considered divine. Each of the gods had a realm of their own."

She looked into the window and took a sip of tea.

"The mortal realms were where the war between the daemons and the gods took place. By the end of it, most of them had been turned into desolate graveyards. They have become the core of the Dream Realm, where Corruption reigns."

Sunny forced his hand to remain steady as he raised his cup and tasted Wind Flower's tea. It was pleasant and soothing, but left a tinge of bitterness on his tongue.

Of course… it made sense. The Dream Realm had always seemed like a patchwork world, with different regions of it inexplicably possessing different skies, celestial bodies, and even laws. The Forgotten Shore, the Chained Isles, the Hollow Mountains, the Nightmare Desert — they did seem more like different worlds that had been roughly smashed together than natural parts of a single whole.

He took a deep breath.

"...What about the divine realms?"

The beautiful Saint smiled.

"Those were left untouched by the war. Even after the gods died, their realms remained. They were isolated from the mortal ones and each other, as well, and so were left untouched by the spreading Corruption… at least for a while. Naturally, there were six of them."

Sunny did not say anything, prompting Wind Flower to continue:

"The world where I come from was one of those six realms. It is similar to the Great River, actually… a beautiful world covered entirely by water, with countless islands rising from it like gems. A world of storms, winds, and stars. Well… it was, before. By now, it must have been consumed by the Dream Realm already."

Sunny's hand finally trembled.

Bringing the cup to his lips, he lingered for a moment, then asked:

"What... what do you mean, consumed?"

Wind Flower leaned back in her chair and sighed.

"From your reaction, it seems that your people have not experienced the worst of it yet. What is the Rank of the most terrible Gate that has opened in this Waking World of yours?"

He frowned.

"A Category Five… a Great Nightmare Gate, I suppose."

The beautiful Saint looked at him with pity.

"I see. Then it will start soon. Once more of them start to appear, pieces of your world will begin to be assimilated by the Dream Realm. Piece by piece, your world will eventually be swallowed entirely, becoming a part of the Dream Realm… just like the other five divine realms have already become a part of it. That is why I said that your world will be the last one the Spell ever infects.

Once it's gone, there won't be anywhere left for it to spread to."

'Become… a part… of the Dream Realm?'

Sunny shivered.

How had Wind Flower described her world? A world of storms, winds, and stars. Didn't it sound like the Stormsea, the region of the Dream Realm controlled by the House of Night?

Had the Stormsea been a world like Earth once, where mundane people lived and struggled, and where the Spell had appeared one day, forcing them on the path of Ascension?

A world that had eventually lost to the tide of Nightmare Gates and was destroyed, becoming another one of the desolate hells of the Dream Realm... just like four more worlds before it?

Would Sunny's world share the same fate?

He shook his head.

"But… why? Why is this happening? Why does the Spell infect

different worlds, and why are they being consumed by the Dream Realm? Where do Nightmare Gates come from? How can we stop it?"

Wind Flower sipped her tea and smiled.

"Sunless… if I knew the answers to these questions, do you think I would be sitting here, imprisoned in a dream on a cursed island, with all my people gone, and my world destroyed?"

She chuckled.

"Whatever the path to victory is… my people have already lost. You still have a chance, at least. A better chance than we did, even — from what I saw, your world is much stronger than mine was. Otherwise, a mere Ascended like you would have never been able to slay my father, no matter how far he was gone because of the Corruption."

The beautiful Saint looked away and lingered for a while. Finally, a hint of sorrow crept into her sweet voice:

"...How did he die, in the end?"

Sunny did not speak until the pain of the Flaw forced him to answer.

How did one tell a person about killing their father? Sunny was not the most tactful of people, but even he knew better than to try and make his voice sound soft. Being nonchalant about the whole thing did not seem right, either.

He sighed.

"From what I know, he went mad after Twilight was lost. By the time we met, he was like a rabid beast… but even then, he was a king among them. I watched him battle many Nightmare Creatures much more powerful than him, and yet, none could defeat your father. After a while… he was severely wounded and weakened. I used that moment to attack, and won after a ferocious battle.

Even then, I would have died as well, if not for my companion."

He paused, and then added respectfully:

"I am sorry for your loss, Lady Wind Flower."

She remained silent for a while, looking away.

The sight of her elegant profile was both sad and beautiful.

...Eventually, Wind Flower smiled.

"Don't be. What is the point of being sorry? He was merely a copy, just like me. I am sure that my real father met a much more glorious end in the true Tomb of Ariel. Who knows? He might have even escaped it."

Wind Flower shook her head and looked at him with a smile.

"But you and your companions are different from me, Sunless. You are here to challenge the Nightmare. So… did you say that you wanted to escape Aletheia's Island?"

Her azure eyes sparkled with dark amusement.

"I'll help you. Helping challengers conquer this Nightmare was my original goal, after all…"

Chapter-1451: Forgotten Name

Sunny had yet to recover from the shocking revelation about the nature of his world, but time waited for no man. The revolution was going to end soon, so he had to gain as much as he could from his first meeting with Wind Flower.

But still…

'If my world is one of the six divine realms… then which god did it belong to?'

The most suitable candidate was War God, the Goddess of Life — as well as of progress, technology, craft, and intellect… the patron deity of humanity. Heart God was a possibility, as well. However, he could not quite imagine Earth having anything to do with the fallen gods of the Dream Realm. These two concepts were just too incompatible.

Plus, the waking world encompassed more than just Earth. There was the moon, the sun… all the planets of the Solar System, and countless stars beyond. A whole universe of them, billions of years old! How could all of it be simply one of the divine realms?

But then again… the gods had never been constrained by mundane logic. They were the ones who had created the universal laws of existence. Even time itself was merely one of their weapons — who was to say that a god could only will something into existence, not will something to have always existed?

'Ah… my brain hurts.'

Sunny's mortal mind seemed to be incapable of truly comprehending such matters.

Wind Flower must have been the same. She certainly knew more than Sunny, but there was no telling how accurate her understanding was.

In any case, for now, it did not matter. He was elated to learn such profound mysteries, but his immediate goal was not enlightenment. It was getting the hell off Aletheia's Island.

And Wind Flower was conveniently offering her help in that regard.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Do you know… how we can escape this horrible place?"

He paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, I should describe our situation first. There are five of us here. Three, including me, start the loop in the hidden bay at the southern edge of the island — well, what I call the southern edge, anyway. The fourth member of the cohort is in the forest, not too far away from the bay. It's the fifth that is the problem… she is all the way on the northern edge of the island."

His expression darkened.

"There are all kinds of terrifying abominations hidden in the mist, so we can't travel freely. No matter how many times I tried, I failed to pick up the fifth member and return to our ship before the loop ends. This tower… and you, Lady Wind Flower… are more or less my last hope."

Wind Flower looked into the window, then let out a quiet sigh and put her cup on the table. Then, she stood up.

"Come with me."

Before Sunny knew it, they were somewhere else. The walls of the Aletheia's Tower disappeared, and he found himself standing at the edge of a tall cliff, looking at the flowing waters below.

The colossal whirlpool was gone, replaced by the beautiful vista of the Great River sparkling under the light of the seven suns. However, not too far away, the world was obscured by the familiar mist… it was the boundary of Wind Flower's dream, most likely.

The enchanting Saint looked into the distance.

"Before that… let me tell you how I ended up imprisoned here, Sunless."

She glanced at him and smiled.

"As you might have guessed already, it was my father who had brought me here, and put me to sleep at the top of Aletheia's Tower. There is a seed of Corruption in my soul, and so… remaining inside this cycle of time is the only way for me to live on."

Her smile dimmed a little. Wind Flower lingered for a moment, then looked at the Great River once again.

"Back then, we laid siege to Verge, hoping to destroy the source of the Defilement and conquer this Nightmare. However… even after breaching the walls of the city and fighting our way to the Citadel of Truth, we failed to defeat the First Seeker."

Studying the exquisite line of her charming face, Sunny scowled.

"The First Seeker… must be tremendously powerful, then."

If even a Sovereign in command of a vast army of Awakened had failed to put an end to the Defilement, then how could their cohort ever hope to succeed?

His thoughts turned dark and bitter. However…

Wind Flower lightly shook her head.

"The First Seeker has no power. That thing could not even be called a living being anymore… it's just a grotesque, sprawling mass of festering flesh contained within the Citadel, its tendrils slowly spreading across all of Verge. The problem, however, is that anyone who touches it becomes infected by Corruption. That… is how I became infected, as well.

In the end, we had no choice but to leave our fallen behind and retreat. That is how our glorious assault ended, in death and misery."

She looked at Sunny somberly.

"So, Sunless, tell me… do you still think that you and your companions can conquer this Nightmare?"

He remained silent for a few moments, trying his hardest not to imagine the revolting image of the cursed city of Verge. The picture Wind Flower painted with just a few words was just too vivid…

Eventually, Sunny nodded.

"I do. One of my companions… she is immune to the Corruption, in fact. I have a Memory to borrow that Ability of hers, as well. There is probably no one in the world suited for the task better than the two of us."

He smiled faintly and lingered for a moment, then added in a strangely dark tone:

"...It must be fate."

Wind Flower did not seem too surprised by the fact that there was someone out there whose soul could not be corrupted. She watched the water flow for a while, then sighed.

"It's good, then. You might really stand a chance to succeed where we failed. In any case, after we retreated from Verge, my father brought me here, to Aletheia's Island. The only place that could delay my eventual fall into Corruption. Quite ironic, don't you think?"

Sunny hesitated.

"I'm not sure that I know what you mean, my lady."

She looked at him with surprise.

"What, you don't know who Aletheia was?"

He frowned, then shook his head.

"I only know that she was called Aletheia of the Nine, and that she was one of the Seekers."

Wind Flower chuckled.

"Yes… you are not wrong. Indeed, she was one of the Seekers. A mysterious sorceress who built this island and created the whirlpool of twisted time surrounding it, for some unknown purpose. She lived here for a while, but eventually left in search of the Estuary… as most Seekers did. Aletheia never returned, and her name slowly disappeared from the memory of the River People."

The beautiful Saint gazed at the Great River with a dark expression.

"Of course, there is something different about Aletheia. Because, unlike all the other Seekers who had traveled downstream in search of the Estuary… she actually found it."

Sunny eyes widened slightly.

"Wait. Do you mean…"

Wind Flower nodded.

"Yes. Although her original name is forgotten, everyone in the Tomb of Ariel now knows her by a different one. The core of this Nightmare, the source of the Defilement... the First Seeker… is Aletheia of the Nine. This island is the estate that she had abandoned before leaving on her fateful journey to the Estuary."

Sunny shivered and instinctively turned around, to look at the distant silhouette of Aletheia's Tower.

Wind Flower, meanwhile, smiled.

"So, you see, it is indeed quite ironic… the seed of Corruption was planted into my soul by the First Seeker, yet my father prevented my soul from being consumed by bringing me to the First Seeker's stronghold. If that is not ironic, then I don't know what is."

She turned away from the Great River and laughed.

"Ah… in any case, after putting me to sleep in Aletheia's Tower, my father meant to return to Twilight and search for a way to destroy the First Seeker. He also meant to find a way to save me… or, if not, then at least to visit me from time to time. However, he never came. Now I know that it is because Twilight was lost, and he succumbed to

Corruption himself."

Wind Flower sighed.

"Well, anyway. That is the past… what is important now is that my father had not only come to Aletheia's Island, but also left it. And I can teach you how to leave it, as well."

Chapter-1452: Path to Salvation

Wind Flower walked along the path in the forest, with Sunny following behind. Although he was certain that there was a long way to go, they arrived at the hidden bay in mere minutes.

It looked… different without the gloomy mist obscuring everything in sight. The white sand sparkled in the bright daylight, and the black cliffs cast deep shadows on the beach. For the first time, Sunny noticed how similar to the Nightmare Desert this place looked.

The Chain Breaker was nowhere to be seen in Wind Flower's dream, but the line of lonesome footprints was still there, leading to the edge of the island.

Sunny stared at it for a moment, then asked out of idle curiosity:

"Whose footprints are these?"

The charming Saint smiled.

"Whose else? Aletheia's. That is where she left the island. It happened countless years ago, of course… but because of how twisted time is here, it also just happened yesterday."

He scratched the back of his head.

"I… see."

So, the footprints belonged to the First Seeker. Sunny honestly did not know what to think of that.

Hiding his unease, he pointed to a particular spot on the beach.

"This is where our ship crashed. Right… it's a flying ship. But currently, it can only fly during dusk and dawn. As soon as I find a way to get the fifth member of our cohort back, we'll wait for the

right time and fly away."

His expression darkened.

"Of course, there's also that… thing in the sky above the island. I'll need to find a way to escape from it, as well."

Wind Flower looked at him and remained silent for a while. Then, she sighed.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Sunless… but even if you get your companion back, you won't be able to escape the island."

His heart skipped a beat.

Staring at the beautiful Saint incredulously, Sunny lingered for a few moments before opening his mouth.

Eventually, though, he asked grimly:

"Oh? And why is that?"

Wind Flower shrugged.

"It's just how it is. Nothing can escape Aletheia's Island the way it came. The whirlpool simply does not release anything once it's caught in its maw… no one is powerful enough to defeat its current. At least no one in the Tomb of Ariel. Flying won't help, either — the winds will throw you down."

Sunny was not amused.

He stared at her some more, then sighed.

"That's a bit contradictory, don't you think, my lady? You said it yourself. Your father, the Serpent King, did escape this island."

She nodded.

"He did. However, I never said that he was strong enough to overcome the pull of the vortex."

Sunny's expression dimmed.

If the monstrous sea serpent he had fought was not powerful enough to swim out of the colossal whirlpool, then who was?

"So how did he leave?"

Wind Flower simply pointed down.

'What is that supposed to mean…'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, staring at the white sand beneath her feet. Then, his eyes slowly widened.

"Do you mean… that the only way to escape the island is to dive into the vortex?"

She smiled.

"Indeed. Granted, surviving what is hidden below the island is not much easier than braving the whirlpool… but your flying ship should be sturdy enough to make it through. And you have the Guiding Light to show you the way."

He frowned.

"What is hidden below the island?"

Wind Flower lingered for a bit.

"Nothing much, really. Just the depths of the Great River, and all the horrors that dwell in them. Usually, diving that deep would mean certain death, but the vortex… it creates a tunnel, of sorts. As long as you don't plunge into the water, you'll be fine."

Sunny was not at all happy about how nonchalant she sounded. Falling into a mystical tunnel that led to the depths of the bottomless Great River? Staying clear of the water? What about these obviously lethal things, exactly, told her that they would be fine?

He sighed.

"And what's on the other side of the tunnel?"

The beautiful Saint hesitated.

"Should be… the inner wall of the pyramid. You'll have to be careful once you reach it, because there are bound to be dangers there. But the important point is that one can make their way back to the Great River by following the inner wall. At least that was what my father believed… and since he did make it back to Twilight alive, he must have been correct."

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Should be? You are not certain?"

Wind Flower chuckled.

"How can I be certain? I never left this island myself. However, others, like my father, did."

'Others…'

So, there was someone else who had come to Aletheia's Island and left, not just the Serpent King. Sunny did not miss that detail.

…He hadn't missed the fact that Wind Flower mentioned the Guiding Light, either. He had never told her about the sacred staff of the sybils, or that it was in their possession. So how did the beautiful Saint know about it?

More and more things about her seemed strange.

The wariness he had felt before suddenly returned.

Sunny remained silent for a while, then said evenly:

"Even if I am willing to try diving into the vortex, the problem remains. I need to get Effie… the fifth member of my cohort… back to the ship before the loop ends, first. And currently, I see no way to do it."

He grimaced.

"There are too many powerful Nightmare Creatures on the island.

There are two Defiled horrors that are even more dangerous than them, as well. There is that thing in the sky. I can't deal with all that in a single day."

Wind Flower looked at him with a curious smile.

"What if you had more time?"

Sunny contemplated her question seriously, then shrugged.

"It would be hard, but not impossible. The problem is not that the enemies are too powerful — if I can't kill them, I can at least run and hide. I can come up with countermeasures and make use of their weaknesses. I can make them fight each other and escape while they do. The problem is that all of this requires time… and there is no time.

Even though it loops endlessly on this island, there's not enough time for me to achieve my goals."

The beautiful Saint studied him for a while, then nodded.

Her next words sent a shiver running down Sunny's spine. Smiling pleasantly, Wind Flower said:

"Well... then you just need to destroy the loop."

Chapter-1453: The Other Guest

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, looking at the charming Saint. A gentle breeze blew from the river, playing with her silky hair… the dream of Aletheia's Island was tranquil and at peace.

'Destroy the loop…'

Was such a thing even possible?

'Why wouldn't it be?'

The closed cycle of time had been created by Aletheia of the Nine. Since it was made by someone, it could naturally be destroyed by someone else. However…

The matter was not that simple.

Even if Wind Flower could teach him how to break the loop, there would be dire ramifications if he did. Up until now, Sunny had suffered enormously due to the twisted nature of time on this harrowing island… but he was also only alive because of it.

Once the loop was broken, the terrible prisoners of Aletheia's Island would remain. Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast would remain, as well… but Sunny was not going to have the luxury of being reborn at the start of a new revolution.

He would only have one chance to prevail against them and escape.

'It's not like I have a lot of choices.'

The plan Wind Flower suggested was a deadly one, but Sunny did not have a better solution. He did not have a lot of time to spare, either… he and Cassie were doing fine, for now, but their mental states would inevitably start to crumble as the trauma of repeated, torturous

deaths accumulated.

It could very well be that they would never be in better condition than now. Sooner or later, they were going to start deteriorating. At least Sunny felt that they would.

The question was… did he really trust Wind Flower?

A deep sigh escaped from his lips.

Looking away, Sunny lingered for a few moments, then said:

"Before I decide whether to agree, I need to ask you a question."

The beautiful Saint chuckled.

"Go ahead."

He glanced at her darkly.

"When you said that we've never met before… was it a lie?"

Wind Flower's smile froze on her lips. She studied him silently for a while, the veil of friendliness finally fading from her gaze to reveal… something much colder, darker, and more frightening.

Finally, for the first time since they met, Sunny felt that he was standing in front of King Daeron's daughter.

…But then the frightening abyss hiding in her eyes was gone, replaced once again by benevolent sweetness.

Wind Flower laughed.

"You really are a sharp one, Sunless. Just like the other one."

Sunny took a deep breath.

'The other one…'

A deep frown appeared on his face.

"The Mad Prince. He is the other visitor you mentioned, then?"

The beautiful Saint looked at him with a nonchalant smile.

A moment later, the white beach disappeared, and they were in Aletheia's Tower again. Wind Flower sat down on her bed and shrugged.

"Indeed. Oh, I must say… even inside the Tomb of Ariel, you truly are the most bizarre of individuals, Sunless. You are the only being to enter my dream in all these years, and yet, there were three visitors."

Sunny slumped on the Shadow Chair.

"...Three?"

She nodded.

"You, that Defiled madman, and the sullen wraith that follows him around."

He stared at her incredulously.

'So the Mad Prince is haunted by his own version of the Sin of Solace. Serves the bastard right… both bastards, really...'

Luckily, his own inner demon had decided to sit the meeting with Wind Flower out.

He shook his head.

"So why did he come to see you? What did he want from you that was worth braving Aletheia's Island?"

The beautiful Saint lingered.

"I'm not sure if I should answer. But then again… why not? You are mistaken, though. Although the Mad Prince did visit me, I was not the reason he had come to the island."

Sunny simply raised an eyebrow, prompting her to continue.

"The reason he came here… was to lure the other two Defiled into a trap."

'What?'

Sunny hid his shock as best he could. Previously, he had theorized that Devouring Beast and Undying Slaughter had been sent to Aletheia's Island because of their Flaws. And it might have been the justification, true… but now, it seemed that they had been left here against their will.

They had been locked in a prison of time by the Mad Prince.

Sunny exhaled slowly.

"Why would that lunatic plot against two other Plagues?"

Wind Flower shrugged.

"I really don't know. Is it surprising, though? The Defiled are different from us, to begin with… and your other self, Sunless, is more insane than most. That said, he was surprisingly lucid, for a Nightmare Creature."

Sunny frowned.

"In what way?"

The charming Saint contemplated for a while.

"It's hard to describe. I've met abominations who could talk like humans before, but never one who seemed so… human-like. Even among the Defiled. In any case, it looked like he was not happy about being the Dread Lord's slave. Or liked what the Dread Lord has done after becoming the tyrant of Verge."

She shrugged.

"You would know better about these matters than I do, though. Not because you and the Mad Prince are the same person, even, but merely because the Six Plagues were yet to appear when I was brought to Aletheia's Island. In fact, I only know of their existence because of the things the Defiled madman mumbled in a fit of frenzy."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

'The Dread Lord's slave…'

It seemed that he did not have to wonder what fate would befall him after Nephis was killed in the future. He had thought that Mordret… the Soul Stealer… would be the one to use Shadow Bond and become his master after the current one disappeared. But actually, it was the Dread Lord… Kai.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

'Who would have thought?'

It was a bit stupid, to be hurt by something that a future, Defiled version of his friend had done. And yet, Sunny couldn't help but feel a little betrayed. It had taken a lot of courage for him to open up to Effie and Kai… knowing that it would come back to bite him, in the end, felt like a punch to the gut.

'No… Kai would never betray me. That thing, the Dread Lord, might be the future version of him. But it is a demented Nightmare Creature, not my friend.'

Much more important was the fact that there seemed to be internal strife between the Six Plagues. Enough of it, at least, for the Mad Prince to try eliminating two of his fellow Defiled champions, be it on the orders of the Dread Lord or of his own accord.

It was great news for the cohort, and could potentially help them conquer this Nightmare.

Sunny sighed and asked with dark curiosity in his voice:

"So what did the two of you talk about?"

Chapter-1454: An Oath and a Promise

Wind Flower remained silent for a while, seated comfortably on her opulent bed.

Eventually, she sighed.

"We made a deal, he and I. I never thought that I would make a deal with a Defiled abomination one day, but then again… I never thought that I'd be imprisoned in a whirlpool of time, forever, either."

Sunny grew tense, staring at the beautiful Saint with a grim expression. The news of her making deals with one of the Six Plagues did not bode well for the cohort...

Noticing his reaction, she chuckled.

"Don't look so worried, Sunless. I did not sell my soul, corrupted as it may be. The Mad Prince… he only wanted to know about Aletheia's Island, and especially about how my father had managed to kill that Great Tyrant in the tower. The creature remains dead no matter how many times the loop resets, which seemed to be of great interest to him.

I, on the other hand… wanted to know what had happened to Twilight and the other human cities on the Great River. And how it was that he appeared wearing my father's crown."

Her gaze once again brushed across the Crown of Twilight. She smiled softly.

"Now, I know."

Sunny lingered for a few moments. There were a lot of things he

wanted to ask about, but it did not seem wise to press Wind Flower for answers.... too much.

The Mirror of Truth was safely hidden in his sleeve, ready to grant him Neph's [Longing] Ability at any moment.

Eventually, he asked:

"How did Daeron make that Tyrant stay dead?"

Wind Flower tilted her head a little.

"...You want to know, as well? It was with the help of a very special Memory. A Legacy Relic left behind by a dear friend. It's gone now, of course. Just like everything else is gone."

'Why was the Mad Prince so interested in the dead Tyrant, though? Unlike me, he did not have to destroy the loop to escape the island. What did he want?'

Sunny tried to understand the motives of his future Defiled version, but failed. It wasn't a good idea to try understanding madmen, anyway.

"How did you know that one of my companions has the Guiding Light, then?"

The beautiful Saint chuckled.

"How else? The madman told me that you would."

Sunny froze.

His eyes narrowed.

'Wait…'

Leaning forward, he pierced Wind Flower with an intense gaze and asked:

"Are you saying… that the Mad Prince knew that we would arrive here one day?"

She simply nodded.

"He seemed quite certain. But why are you surprised... you are the same person, after all."

Sunny let out a shaky breath.

Indeed… if the Mad Prince was the future version of him, then the bastard would have already experienced coming to Aletheia's Island before.

Still, something about it didn't make sense.

If the Defiled lunatic already possessed the memories of meeting Wind Flower and learning about the island from her, like Sunny was currently learning, then why would he need to come and ask again?

And if she had already met Sunny by the time the Mad Prince arrived, wouldn't she have already had the answers to her own questions?

It didn't make any sense at all!

…Just like Undying Slaughter and Jet existing at the same time did not make sense. The same went for Devouring Beast and Effie. Or everything else about this damned pyramid.

If anything, though, the new revelation made it seem as though the Six Plagues were somehow alien to this timeline… more alien than Sunny and his companions were, at least.

'Focus on the task at hand. How to escape this cursed island…'

Sunny gritted his teeth, remained silent for a few moments, and then said:

"...So how do I destroy the loop?"

He suddenly hesitated.

Before Wind Flower could answer, Sunny raised a hand and added, his voice low:

"Wait. If I do destroy the loop… you will die, won't you?"

The Saint simply looked at him with a smile on her lips.

'She will. That is why she is here on Aletheia's Island, after all… this is the only place where she can exist.'

So, by destroying the loop, Sunny would be... he would be killing Wind Flower.

She watched him for a bit, then shook her head.

"You are both right and wrong. I… Wind Flower of the Twilight Sea… will indeed cease to exist if the cycle of time is broken. However, I won't die. No, what waits for me is much worse than death — it's Corruption."

Her smile slowly disappeared, leaving behind only coldness. The beautiful Saint looked at him somberly, then said:

"That is why we are going to make another deal, you and I."

Sunny met her heavy gaze and shifted slightly.

"What deal might that be?"

Wind Flower stared at him for a few moments, then smiled darkly.

"It's simple, really. I will teach you how to break the cycle of time. In return, Sunless… you will kill me."

His expression cracked for a moment.

"What?"

The beautiful Saint nodded.

"You will make an oath that after the loop is destroyed and before Corruption swallows my soul, you will kill me. That is the only way I'll show you how to escape Aletheia's Island with all your companions."

Sunny looked at her solemnly.

He… couldn't say that he didn't understand. Indeed, if he was in Wind Flower's place, he would have preferred death to turning into a Nightmare Creature. At least, he hoped that he would.

But still…

Wasn't it just too sad?

Sunny sighed.

"You want to die?"

Hearing his question, Wind Flower chuckled.

"You make it sound so serious."

Her enchanting azure eyes ignited with humorous sparks.

"Remember, Sunless… I am not even a real person. I've been conjured by the Spell to play a role in this Nightmare, and so, there is no purpose for my existence outside the Nightmare. So… wouldn't it be a fitting end for a creature like me, to be killed by a real person like you? By a person who will conquer the Nightmare?"

She fell silent, looking into the window with a distant expression on her beautiful, charming face.

After a few moments of silence, she added in a softer tone:

"I won't ask you for another oath, Sunless. But… make me a promise, if you will. That you'll conquer this Nightmare, indeed."

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at her with a heavy expression.

…Eventually, he sighed and opened his mouth to speak.

Not long after that, he was back on the deck of the Chain Breaker.

Chapter-1455: Puppet Master

The white beach was shrouded in mist once again. The bright and beautiful vista of Wind Flower's dream was gone, replaced by the chilling gloom of reality. Surrounded by the flowing fog and dreadful silence, Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

His heart was beating wildly, full of crippling panic and boundless dread.

…These feelings were not something he wanted to feel, or had a reason to. Rather, they were simply an instinctual response caused by meeting countless harrowing ends in this misty hell. Even when Sunny was calm, his body remembered every torturous death, every heart-wrenching loss, and every pained cry.

The sight of the white fog enveloping the Chain Breaker was a promise of many more torments to come. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm his heart… it was getting harder and harder to do with each new revolution.

A few moments later, Sunny let out a long sigh and turned around.

Cassie was facing him with a somber expression on her pale face. She lingered for a few moments, then leaned heavily on the Guiding Light and asked in a quiet voice:

"So? How did it go?"

He looked away.

"I met her. There is… a lot to discuss. We should bring Jet back first."

The blind girl nodded listlessly, then walked over to Nightmare, adjusted the stirrups, and climbed into the saddle. A few moments

later, she disappeared into the mist.

Nephis had been observing them tiredly. Her brow was furrowed into a deep frown. Glancing at Sunny, she asked:

"What is going on?"

He met her gaze and sighed.

"Cassie… is off to find Jet. Let's just rest for a bit, please. I'll explain everything when they return."

She studied his face for a few moments, as if wanting to ask more. Eventually, however, Nephis simply nodded and said in her usual emotionless tone:

"You don't look too well."

Sunny looked at her. Neph was not in the best state herself… she seemed spent and exhausted, almost ready to topple at any moment. Her already pale face was drained of all color, her eyes sunken and slightly unfocused. The slumped shoulders, the sickly pallor, the feverish gaze… these were the symptoms of extreme essence exhaustion.

He smiled.

"You look beautiful, though."

With that, Sunny lowered himself to the deck and leaned against the railing. Nephis remained motionless for a few moments, flustered. Then, she silently sat down near him and rested the back of her head on the ancient wood.

"I'll wait until Cassie returns, then."

He did not answer, staring into the mist.

Sunny… had a lot to think about.

It had taken him a long time — many lifetimes of dread, really — to reach Aletheia's Tower. However, the truths Wind Flower had

revealed to him were all worth it.

There was so much he had learned from the beautiful, forsaken Saint. The origin of the Dream Realm and the Waking World… the true identity of the First Seeker… the secrets of Aletheia's Island, and so much more. Even the impossible number of challengers who had entered this Nightmare had an explanation now.

But, most importantly…

He had learned a few things about the Mad Prince.

'At this point… I can't deny it anymore.'

That Defiled madman… the future version of himself… had visited Wind Flower in her dream. Sunny might have met a strange echo of his corrupted future in a nightmare, but the bastard had spoken to Wind Flower personally. Which meant that the Mad Prince had the [Dreamwalker] Ability, just like Nightmare did, or something similar to it.

In all the years that Daeron's daughter had spent sleeping on Aletheia's Island, they were her only guests. That proved that very few beings possessed power over dreams, even here in the Tomb of Ariel.

And that meant…

'It was him.'

Sunny exhaled slowly.

It was not Dusk, but the Mad Prince who had sent Ananke a dream message so that she would find the Children of Weaver… find Sunny and Nephis, and send them off to Fallen Grace.

It was that madman who had massacred Weave, then used its last priestess to guide them deeper into the Nightmare. Past the time storm and to the derelict of the Chain Breaker.

It was also him who had created the Estuary Key and secreted it away in Sunny's soul, somehow.

He could have even been the author of the demented runes Sunny had seen on the piece of flotsam drifting in the upper reaches of the Great River.

Why had the Mad Prince done all these things?

'No, before that…'

What else had that monster done?

Suddenly, Sunny was covered in cold sweat.

Now that he knew that the mysterious puppeteer responsible for many of the strange things happening in this Nightmare was none other than his future corrupted self, he couldn't help but perceive everything that had happened so far in a new light.

What else did not make any sense?

Too many things. But there was one in particular…

'Why wasn't Fallen Grace destroyed?'

Led by the Six Plagues, the Defiled had successfully destroyed Twilight and every city of the sybils — except for Fallen Grace. That last city, though, had strangely been spared. It was attacked by the Defiled from time to time, sure, but none of the Heralds of the Estuary had ever shown up to erase it from existence themselves.

Their inaction seemed very strange, in hindsight.

Was it, perhaps, because the Mad Prince needed Sunny and Nephis to visit it one day, for some reason? To come into possession of the Guiding Light, perhaps?

…Or was it because the Six Plagues simply couldn't appear anymore?

The Defiled madman had treacherously eliminated Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast from the board, after all. Who was to say that Soul Stealer, Torment, and even the Dread Lord himself had not been dealt with in a similar fashion?

Sunny had thought that the final obstacle of the Third Nightmare would be the Six Plagues. But now, he was not so sure anymore.

'What the hell is going on?'

Was the Mad Prince… actually an ally?

Remembering the visage of the horrid lunatic whose remnant once appeared in his dream, Sunny shook his head.

'No, that is impossible. He is a Nightmare Creature.'

But then again, Wind Flower had mentioned that the Mad Prince seemed strangely lucid for an abomination. Why would he be?

Suddenly, a strange idea appeared in Sunny's mind. He froze for a moment, then lowered his gaze and glanced at Neph's sword.

Was it because… the Mad Prince was haunted by the Sin of Solace?

The sword wraith was supposed to slowly drive a human insane. What would its effect on a Nightmare Creature be, then? What would madness mean to a being whose mind was inherently alien to all things human?

Sunny did not know why, but he felt that he somehow stumbled on a glimpse of truth. If the wraith born from a sinister whisper of Ariel, the Demon of Dread, had indeed helped his future self maintain a sliver of humanity even after becoming Defiled…

Then he still wouldn't be an ally.

However, it was entirely possible that the Mad Prince had other goals than the Plagues did.

'Just what is my evil twin scheming?'

Sunny did not know.

In fact, after learning so much, he felt that he knew even less than he had before.

He was sure of one thing, though.

The sinister shadow of the Mad Prince was behind everything that had happened in the Nightmare so far. And that…

Was an indescribably chilling thought.

Sunny knew himself all too well, after all.

Even slightly lucid, he was a very scary enemy to have.

Chapter-1456: Do What You Want

Cassie and Jet soon returned to the Chain Breaker. Sunny had explained the basic information about the loop to Nephis by then — however, he kept the things Wind Flower had told him to himself, for the time being.

Not because he was reluctant to share the knowledge, but simply because he did not want to repeat it all for the second time once they reached Effie.

The cohort set out to the far side of the island without any delay. As they traveled, made weapons, fought abominations, and hid in the forest to wait out the more harrowing ones, Sunny couldn't help but think about Wind Flower…

And the oath he had made.

'Kill her…'

Sunny's Flaw did not compel him to fulfill any oaths… it just prevented him from making an insincere one. Still, he was free to change his mind at any moment.

'Can I kill her?'

Of course, he could. However, it would be an understatement to say that Sunny was reluctant to.

He was not an innocent man. In fact, there was plenty of human blood on his hands. He had even enjoyed killing some of his victims, albeit very few. Mostly, he did not like it one bit.

The thought of killing someone like Wind Flower was abhorrent.

He… admired the charming Saint from a different world a great deal. He also felt a lot of compassion for her tragic plight.

And yet, bitterly, there was nothing else he could do for her. Death was the only mercy he could give Wind Flower.

'How… fitting. Shadow God would have been proud.'

Sunny had even considered surrendering the Mirror of Truth to her. But there was very little chance that it would help. Yes, Wind Flower would be able to delay the spread of Corruption by a few hours if she borrowed Neph's Aspect Ability. But there was almost no hope that the seed of Corruption would not only be temporarily hindered, but disappear as a result.

Once the Mirror of Truth crumbled, the seed would most likely still be there, in Wind Flower's soul. Then, only death would be able to save her.

…Even knowing that the chance was infinitely small, Sunny had still offered his Memory to the beautiful Saint. It was a very rare thing, for him to act selflessly in that way. But she refused.

Wind Flower did not explain her reasons, but Sunny suspected that it was because of the First Seeker and how precious the Mirror of Truth would be if someone wanted to destroy the abominable creature.

'Curse it…'

Feeling grim, Sunny went through the motions of traversing Aletheia's Island.

Some time later, the five members of the cohort were together once again. Sunny had finally shared his findings with his companions, not holding anything back. Their reactions, just as he had expected, were very intense.

It was not every day that one learned about the origin of their own world.

Well… here on Aletheia's Island, one could. But generally speaking, news of this caliber was exceedingly rare.

Eventually, the heated discussion died down. Tired of trying to comprehend divine matters, Sunny and his companions turned their attention to more mundane issues.

The Six Plagues, and the Mad Prince.

"I just don't know what he wants. I see how that it's funny, considering that he is me… but he is also a Nightmare Creature, and almost entirely mad. I can't tell."

The others remained silent for a while, their expressions somber. No one liked to know that their actions were being manipulated by a sinister Corrupted Saint.

Eventually, it was Nephis who broke the silence. Looking into the fire that they've made to prepare food, she said:

"I think we are asking the wrong question."

Sunny looked at her intently.

"Which question should we be asking, then?"

Nephis hesitated for a few moments. Her expression… seemed strangely distant. Leaning forward, she put more fuel into the fire and asked:

"What do the Six Plagues want?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times. Sitting to his left, Effie frowned.

"Isn't the answer obvious? They are doing what all Nightmare Creatures do. Trying to obliterate everything that is not Corrupted, until there's only Corruption left. Here in the Tomb of Ariel, it means eliminating all River People."

Nephis nodded.

"But why do they want to eliminate all River People?"

None of them knew what to answer, so they just stared at her in confusion.

Did abominations need a reason to slaughter humans?

She sighed.

"Let's go with another question, then. If the person who challenged a Nightmare succumbs to Corruption… what happens to them when the Nightmare ends?"

Sunny opened his mouth, feeling a bit stunned by that question.

"They will… they will…"

He hesitated. Nothing like that had ever happened, at least not to his knowledge. So, there was no definitive answer. The most likely one, though, was that…

"They will be expelled back to where they came from?"

Nephis nodded once again.

"So then. If the Six Plagues want to escape the Nightmare, they have to conquer it, just like we do."

She sighed.

"But how do they conquer it?"

Jet looked at her with a frown.

"They need to destroy the source of the Defilement and save the…"

But then, she suddenly fell silent.

The rest of them were silent, too.

'No… saving the River People is not the goal of the Nightmare.'

Sunny gritted his teeth.

The goal of the Nightmare was never straightforward. There was one conflict at the heart of each Seed, yes, but many possible solutions. In the case of this Nightmare, the conflict was about the fate of the Great River civilization. One possible solution would be to destroy

the source of the Defilement and save the River People…

But another, no less valid, solution would be to ensure their annihilation. Once every human in the Tomb of Ariel was either dead or Defiled, the conflict would have been resolved, as well.

His eyes widened a little.

"Are you trying to say… that the Plagues… went on a rampage across the Great River, destroying the cities of the sybils one after another… to conquer the Nightmare?"

Nephis stared into the fire, dancing flames reflecting in her beautiful grey eyes.

"That would make sense, would it not? Their goal is the opposite of ours. But, more than that… since we know what their ambition is and that it's different from the Mad Prince's… we can also guess what he wants."

She looked at Sunny and shrugged.

"It seems to me that what your future self wants… is to make sure that this Nightmare never ends. Or at least that it doesn't end the way the other Plagues desire. Ah, I might be wrong, of course."

Sunny suddenly remembered the dream where he met the remnant of the Mad Prince. The hatred in the abomination's voice when he called Sunny a murderer.

'Why would that bastard want the Nightmare to last forever? Or does he want something else?'

As a deep scowl appeared on his face, Cassie asked calmly, her voice pulling him back to their conversation:

"So, what then? Should we just sit back and relax while the Plagues conquer the Nightmare for us?"

Nephis glanced at her, then slowly shook her head.

"First of all, we don't know how long it will take. Secondly, I don't

want to release these monsters into the waking world."

She looked at them somberly, remained silent for a moment, and then added in a flat tone:

"Most importantly… whether we like it or not, we are also here in the Tomb of Ariel. Cassie assumed the role of the ruler of Fallen Grace. Effie and Jet are the last of the River Nomads. If the Six Plagues want to eradicate all humans on the Great River… they won't be able to achieve that goal unless they eradicate us, too."

A strange smile appeared on his face.

"It's almost as if the core of this Nightmare is to throw two versions of our cohort at each other, and see which one survives."

She shook her head.

"Of course, one of these versions is vastly more powerful. While the other… the other has me."

Chapter-1457: Hunting Stronger Beasts

In the end, Sunny had once again drawn the map of Aletheia's Island on the ground. Only, this time, it was much more detailed. He also knew where most of the truly dangerous Nightmare Creatures would be at any given point… his time map was complete.

The members of the cohort studied it for a while, listening to his explanations. Sunny described the prisoners of the nightmarish island in as much detail as he could, sometimes relying on Cassie to provide the most crucial pieces of information. As the two of them spoke in turns, the faces of their companions grew more and more somber.

Eventually, Sunny looked at the map with a dark expression and fell silent for a few moments. When he spoke again, his voice was even:

"Destroying the loop will not be easy. However… it is what comes after we destroy it that is truly dangerous."

He pointed to the map.

"We will still be trapped on the island after the loop is broken. And… the rest of its prisoners will be, as well. These terrible Nightmare Creatures, as well as Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast. But this time, none of us will be revived by the loop, should we die"

Sunny looked at his companions.

"Which means that we will have only one attempt to escape this hell alive."

Despite his solemn tone, Effie suddenly chuckled. He threw her an annoyed glance at her, then asked:

"What's so funny?"

She shook her head.

"No, nothing. Sorry… but that's how it usually goes, isn't it? If you die, you die. Cassie and you might have been living by a different set of rules recently, but for the rest of us, everything is pretty much how it has always been."

He sighed.

'Well… she's not wrong.'

No matter how much he tried to avoid it, the loop had messed with his perception of life and death. But for Effie, Jet, and Nephis… what he had warned them about was already perfectly natural.

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, good. Keep that attitude. In any case, what I meant is that there can't be any mistakes. We will have one day to destroy the loop. On that day, three things need to happen."

As he spoke, the tip of the Sin of Solace traced a few marks on the map:

"The shrine, the lake, and the tower. We must retrieve the enchantment key from the shrine and find something on the bottom of the lake before entering the tower. Once inside, we will be able to achieve our goal. If we do it before the day ends…"

His voice grew somber:

"We will still be stuck in the middle of the island. And we won't know where the Nightmare Creatures are anymore — once the loop is broken, most of the knowledge Cassie and I have so painstakingly gathered will become worthless. Returning to the Chain Breaker will be just as dangerous as our first exploration of Aletheia's Island."

Sunny grimaced.

"...Just for your information, we all died during that first exploration.

Well, at least I think we did — I wouldn't know, actually, because I died first."

The rest of them studied the map somberly. Eventually, Nephis spoke:

"But we don't need to go to the Chain Breaker straight away, do we?"

A subtle smile appeared on his face.

"Neph gets it. Good job, Neph!"

Pointing to the tower with his sword, he said:

"Aletheia's Tower is more or less the safest place on the island. Once the loop is broken, the Nightmare Creatures will continue killing each other… or, at least, Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast will continue killing to satiate their Flaws.

So, the smartest thing we can do is lock ourselves in the tower and wait for them to massacre all the abominations that would have swallowed us on the way back to the beach otherwise."

Finally, Sunny grinned.

"And then, just before the dust settles, we can slip away, board the Chain Breaker, and escape."

Nephis looked at him with a complicated expression.

After a few moments of silence, she said:

"Or… we don't escape."

For a moment, there was dead silence.

Sunny looked at her impassively.

"What do you mean?"

Of course, he knew exactly what she meant. He had considered this course of action himself, despite how risky it was. It was just that… Sunny was not sure if he should mention anything.

Nephis shrugged.

"Two of the Six Plagues are right here, on the island. Why don't we kill them before we leave?"

Jet smiled darkly.

"I would love nothing more than to get rid of Undying Slaughter. But, Nephis… you haven't seen that thing. You haven't fought her. Do you know how lethal she is? How are we supposed to kill older, scarier, more powerful versions of ourselves?"

Unexpectedly, it was Effie, not Neph, who answered. Looking up from where she sat on the ground, the huntress said:

"That's the thing, though. They are us, so… we know their weaknesses. We can exploit those weaknesses — that is how you hunt a stronger beast."

She smiled.

"We know their Flaws, don't we? I mean that we should wait for them to grow weak from hunger, then finish the wretches off to make sure that they don't get a chance to escape."

Listening to her, Nephis nodded.

Effie looked away, her smile dimming. After a moment of silence, she added quietly:

"I might not be the most useful member of the cohort currently, but I think we should try."

Nephis seemed to share her opinion.

"Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast might die on this island, anyway… but they might also escape the same way we are planning to escape, or through some other means. There won't be a better opportunity for us to strike down two of the Plagues. So, I think we should try, as well."

Cassie remained silent, while Sunny shrugged.

"I don't know. I think I'd rather just leave them behind and run the hell away."

All attention concentrated on Jet. She did not speak for a while, then asked with a faint grin:

"Aren't you all forgetting something? Effie and I have the same Flaws as those two monsters. If they starve, we'll starve, too."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then let out a resentful sigh.

"That… can be solved. Not a problem."

Soul Reaper glanced at him briefly, then shrugged.

"Well, then… I vote we kill ourselves, too."

She blinked a couple of times.

"I mean, kill our future selves. You guys get what I mean, right?"

Sunny let out a stiffled chuckle and nodded.

"Yes... we get it. Let's kill some Plagues, why don't we?"

They spent the rest of the revolution discussing the plan in great detail.

Once it was over...

A new revolution started, just like it always did.

But this one, hopefully, was going to be their last.

Chapter-1458: One Last Time

Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around. The white mist of Aletheia's Island surrounded the Chain Breaker…

'The last time. This is the last time.'

He turned around and nodded at Cassie. Without wasting a single moment, she climbed into Nightmare's saddle and disappeared into the fog. Sunny, meanwhile, faced Nephis and asked.

"Are you alright?"

She was looking in the direction where Cassie had gone to with a frown on her tired face. Hearing his question, Nephis turned.

"...I'm fine. I can still fight."

He smiled.

"That's what I wanted to hear. Before you ask where Cassie had gone, let me explain a few things."

Taking a step closer, Sunny placed his hand on Neph's shoulders and leaned forward a little.

…Her alabaster face had suddenly turned even more motionless than it usually was.

"First of all, this is not the first time we are having this conversation. You just don't remember all the previous ones. The vortex surrounding this island, you see, is not a mundane vortex. It is a whirlpool of time, and so, time moves in a circle on this island. The same day repeats itself endlessly, and we have lived it dozens of times already."

Neph's eyes widened slightly.

A different person would have been stunned into silence by such a bizarre proclamation, but not her. Only a few moments later, she asked evenly:

"How come you remember, and I don't, then?"

Sunny pointed to her sword.

"It's because of the Sin of Solace. It remembers, and so, I've come to remember as well. After a while, Cassie did, too. Which is both a blessing and a curse. Neph… believe it or not, we have severely underestimated how dreadful of a hell this island is. We've already died countless times, each death more terrible than the last.

Cassie, you, me… each of us was killed over and over again."

Nephis studied his face with a hint of indignation on her pale face. Before she could retort, though, Sunny grinned.

"However! That is in the past. This time, we have a plan — one that will allow us to break the loop, save Jet and Effie, and escape this hellish place once and for all. You just need to trust me… well, and fight like your life depends on it. Can you do that?"

She remained silent for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Sure. But… as you can tell, my essence is utterly exhausted. I'm not exactly in the best shape."

He smiled.

"That's alright. Don't worry… you still look beautiful."

Seeing her face turn entirely motionless again, Sunny grinned and added:

"Oh, right. By the way, did I mention that Effie is pregnant?"

Finally, Neph's stoic expression cracked.

A moment later, her rattled voice resounded in the fog:

"W—what?!"

***

This time, they did not wait for Cassie and Jet before leaving the Chain Breaker. Mere minutes after the blind girl rode Nightmare into the mist, Sunny and Nephis jumped down to the beach and set out east, in the direction of the bone orchard.

As Sunny walked, a vague figure appeared from the fog, almost scaring him.

The Sin of Solace looked bored.

"You still haven't given up? How pitiful. Or… wait! Did you really convince yourself that you would succeed this time? What a fool. You'll just die again… your friends will die again… it's hopeless.

There is no escape."

Not even sparing the wraith a glance, Sunny walked past it. The apparition laughed and shouted at his back:

"Or, better yet! You might actually destroy the loop, only to watch your friends die anyway! Forever, this time. Wouldn't that be a perfect ending for this tired farce?"

'What a bastard. Go die in a ditch!'

Shaking his head, Sunny continued walking.

With Saint moving in the vanguard and Fiend guarding the rear of their small formation, they made swift progress. As they walked, Sunny explained a lot of things to Nephis.

"...And so, that is what we must achieve today."

She remained silent for a while, thinking. Eventually, Nephis sighed.

"I see."

He had poured a lot of information on her, most of it utterly stunning. From the nature of Aletheia's Island to the truth about the Divine Realms, from the role that the Mad Prince had played in their journey to the true motives of the Six Plagues… it had to be a lot to take in. Sunny wasn't surprised that Neph was keeping quiet.

What was she thinking about?

After a few minutes spent in silence, Nephis finally looked at him and said, her voice even:

"It must have been hard on you."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, then smiled faintly.

"Well, yes. It wasn't easy."

Looking away, she lingered for a moment, and said:

"It must have been hard on me, as well."

Sunny's smile slowly disappeared.

'It must have been. Yeah…'

He knew it very well. No matter how torturous his deaths had been… in the end, watching his companions die had been so much more painful. Nephis did not remember any of the previous revolutions — but that did not mean that she had not lived them.

Every time Sunny had ventured into the mist and never returned, she would have learned of his deaths from the runes. She would have had a reason to keep an eye on them, after all, unlike him.

And so, she would have lived the rest of each revolution knowing that he had been killed.

Walking slightly behind him, Nephis took a deep breath.

"Sunny… I'll make sure that none of us dies, this time."

She paused, and then added quietly, white sparks igniting in her eyes:

"If this is really the last time, we might as well burn this entire island down."

He stared at her in amusement.

"How are you going to burn anything down? Get some essence back first, you maniac."

Nephis coughed.

After a few moments of silence, she suddenly asked in a perfectly even voice:

"So… in all these revolutions… has something else happened? For example… between us?"

Sunny glanced at her nonchalantly.

'Has it ever...'

After a few moments of silence, he shrugged.

"Well. You made me breakfast once. With dessert."

He could have sworn that Nephis almost stumbled.

Chapter-1459: Musical Diversion

As they approached the bone orchard, Sunny felt a swift shadow approaching them from the mist. Soon, Nightmare dove out of the swirling fog, carrying Cassie and Jet on his back.

Jet was pale and bleeding from the wounds on her back, but she seemed calm and composed. Cassie should have already explained what was going on to her — if Soul Reaper had questions, she was keeping them to herself.

"Hey, Sunny."

Her voice was a little hoarse.

Climbing down from the black stallion, Jet remained silent for a moment, then looked at him with a dark smile.

"I hear that you have a plan to kill that thing in the mist. Good. Count me in."

Then, she chuckled quietly.

"Where are my manners? Greetings to you too, Changing Star. Thanks for coming to pick me up."

Nephis studied her for a few moments, then nodded silently.

With that out of the way, the cohort proceeded to the bone orchard. Soon, a forest of towering bones appeared from the mist. Cassie led everyone to the Hollow Butterfly while Sunny looked around with a grim expression.

He had not summoned the Fragment yet, nor had he made use of the

Mirror of Truth. Sunny wanted to only use the former if there was no other choice. As for the latter… the latter was needed for their eventual fight against the First Seeker, so he had to preserve it at all costs.

...Which was not to say that he had nothing else prepared to make this last revolution special.

Once they were standing in front of the monstrous butterfly, the usual routine of making its legs into pikes was abandoned. Instead, Cassie took Jet and Nephis aside to teach them about the Cavern Terror in detail.

Sunny, meanwhile, sighed and sat down on a protruding bone fragment.

This time, there was too much for the cohort to do within a single revolution. Which was why there was no other choice but to split the tasks between him and Cassie.

Cassie was going to lead Nephis and Jet, as well as Saint and Fiend, into the caverns to slay the Terror. Then, they would complete a couple minor tasks… and venture into the overgrown shrine to retrieve the enchantment key.

Sunny would have to travel to the far side of the island above ground, retrieve Effie, and visit the blood lake.

Of course, none of these tasks could be completed fast enough, considering how dangerous and teeming with harrowing Nightmare Creatures the island was. Which was why he had to create a diversion, somehow.

As he sat and looked at the Hollow Butterfly with a dark expression, Sunny summoned a flute made out of emerald bone and absentmindedly brought it to his lips. Soon, a slow, sorrowful melody echoed in the mist.

Cassie, who had been explaining the powers of the Cavern Terror to Nephis and Jet, paused for a moment and turned slightly. Then, she placed the Guiding Light on the ground near him and continued the

explanation.

'I wonder what Kai is doing right now…'

Sunny sighed.

Would his friend appreciate how much better at playing the flute he had become? Was he even alive, still? Or was he long dead?

Dead…

Sunny felt the smooth texture of the Bone Singer with the tips of his fingers.

He had received this Memory quite a while ago… in the depths of another Nightmare. Back in the bloody arena of the Red Colosseum, he had gotten it for slaying a monstrous emerald skeleton.

The Bone Singer had not received much use since. Apart from erecting the dome of silence a few times with the help of its [Silenced] enchantment, Sunny mostly just played it for fun, slowly polishing his musical skill… what little of it he possessed. Nevertheless, it was a very important Memory for him.

The other of its enchantments, [Sonorous], was the first enchantment he had ever copied, after all, transplanting it to the Silver Bell first, then to the Ordinary Rock — which subsequently became the Extraordinary Rock. So, the Bone Singer represented a great milestone in his development as a sorcerer.

The emerald flute possessed a third enchantment, though. One he had never used…

[Sepulcher Song].

That enchantment allowed the master of the Bone Singer to raise the dead, provided he actually knew how to play it.

'Here we go…'

Nephis had already regained enough essence to use her Dormant Ability on Jet. Receiving a sliver of white flame from her, Sunny took

a deep breath…

And sent a flood of essence into the emerald flute while his fingers danced across its surface. The melody he played suddenly grew vicious and angry.

In the next moment...

The bone orchard stirred.

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Sitting on a fragment of an ancient bone, Sunny played a bone flute. Cold sweat was rolling down his face.

All around him, the towering remains of unspeakable horrors were moving and stirring, slowly coming back to life… or at least to some semblance of life. Jet was watching that chilling scene with a strange expression on her face.

'I really… really hope it works…'

The [Sepulcher Song] enchantment could raise the dead, but Sunny had never found a use for it until now. Yes, it had taken him a long time to teach himself how to play the flute well enough to produce a coherent melody… but that was not the problem. Actually, he had been good enough to activate the enchantment for a while now.

The problem was that once the dead were raised, they would not be under his command. On the contrary, the risen corpses would be murderous, wicked, and entirely beyond his control. The only way to control them… was by playing another melody.

And that melody, Sunny had not been able to master before becoming trapped within the loop. Even after experimenting with it on Aletheia's Island, he was not entirely confident that he would be able to enthrall the murderous corpses.

…There was nothing like a swarm of giant dead leviathans to make him feel motivated, though.

'If it doesn't work, I might just become one of these corpses myself…'

As his fingers started to tremble, Sunny continued to play an angry melody.

Chapter-1460: Dead March

The [Sepulcher Song] was an active enchantment that consumed more essence depending on how great the number and power of the corpses stirred into a murderous rage by it was. An Ascended could wreak a lot of havoc with its help…

But not nearly as much havoc as Sunny, an Ascended Tyrant whose soul was augmented by Neph's flame, could.

Influenced by the angry melody he was playing, most of the bone orchard was already in motion. Some of the giant skeletal remains were too severely damaged to assemble into the semblance of a whole creature… but there were plenty of dead abominations who could.

Some of them had clearly been aquatic abominations in the past. Nevertheless, they slithered and crawled forward in the throes of bloodlust. Some of them seemed to have been able to walk on land. Those were moving much faster to kill something, as quickly and as cruelly as possible.

Slowly, towering figures rose from the ground in a cacophony of groaning bones. The terrifying bloodlust and murderous rage emanated by them were almost palpable.

'Crap, crap, crap…'

Both of Sunny's hands were busy with the flute, and he obviously could not speak. Aloud, that was.

[Go now.]

Sending the mental message with the help of the Shroud of Dusk, Sunny glanced at the dark entrance to the caverns that had been revealed when the dead creature obscuring it moved closer to him.

Sparing him one last glance, his companions rushed away and dove into the welcoming darkness. Nephis lingered on the edge for a few moments, then gritted her teeth and jumped down. Saint and Fiend followed right behind her, leaving Sunny and Nightmare alone with the army of risen abominations.

The towering corpses, meanwhile… were staggering toward them with a clear intent to rip the flute player and his steed apart.

'Now, for the next part…'

Sunny slowly rose… or rather, was pushed off when the piece of bone he had been sitting on suddenly flew up. Somehow managing to keep the melody, he regained his balance and continued to play the Bone Singer while awkwardly jumping into the saddle.

Judging that every skeleton he could have brought back to life had already risen, Sunny stopped for a moment and took a deep breath.

Then, as Nightmare cautiously backed away, he started to play a different melody.

If the previous one was fast and angry, then this one was calm and soothing. It was meant to bring the murderous corpses under his control. Sunny had succeeded in his experiments to play the second movement of the Sepulcher Song a couple of times — on a way lesser scale, though — so he knew that he could do it.

'Any moment now…'

But despite the fact that he was trying his best to play the melody perfectly… the shambling bone giants were still approaching him with a clear intent to rip him to shreds and bathe in his blood.

'That doesn't even make sense. I'm so much smaller than them, what are they going to be bathing in?! It's more like I'll be smeared across the phalanx of one of these monstrosities!'

Even worse…

The Hollow Butterfly which had been motionless before suddenly moved, as well.

The Bone Singer did not really return the dead to life… it simply turned corpses into murderous bone golems. Or flesh golems — the sinister Memory paid no attention to the state of the corpse. Which meant that it did not need the dead creature to have had a soul in order to animate it.

The Hollow Butterfly was coming to a perverse semblance of life, too.

As it did, the drain on Sunny's essence increased.

'Curses!'

It seemed that he was not going to put this army of dead monstrosities under his command.

Well… that was fine, too. Sunny had accounted for such a possibility, as well.

After all, he did not really need the risen corpses to listen to him — he just needed them to create as much havoc as possible on Aletheia's Island, temporarily stealing the attention of all the Nightmare Creatures imprisoned on it.

Now that the dead giants of the bone orchard had been brought back to life, they would remain so until Sunny's essence ran out, or until they were completely destroyed. There was plenty of time for them to clash with the prisoners of the island.

That way, he would be able to reach Effie and travel to the blood lake much faster. Cassie and her team would be able to reach the overgrown shrine without meeting much danger, too.

'Plan B, then!'

Giving up on soothing the murderous corpses with a pleasant melody, Sunny lowered the Bone Singer… and commanded Nightmare to run as fast as the black stallion could.

A moment later, the two of them were already flying between the staggering skeletons, heading for the forest.

An army of dead giants pursued. Even the Hollow Butterfly took to

the sky, one flap of its mighty wings sending a hurricane gale across the bone orchard… or rather, the former bone orchard. Left without the Great Monster's care, its eggs were cracking and bursting open, the corpses of revolting maggots crawling out of them while burning with bloodlust.

'Great… go fight the Harvester, you ugly bug… gods, I hate butterflies!'

Sunny dove under the protection of the ancient pines, only to hear them snap and shatter a few moments later. The dead leviathans he had risen might not have been as enormous as Devouring Beast, but they were giant and powerful enough to bulldoze through the misty forest.

Now, he only hoped that they would be sturdy and powerful enough to last awhile against the harrowing prisoners of Aletheia's Island. And that his essence would last long enough.

And that they would not catch up to him and Nightmare before getting distracted by some unfortunate abomination.

'Faster!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny flew through the mist.

Effie was waiting for him on the other side of the island…

Chapter-1461: Encore

Pursued by an army of dead giants, Sunny and Nightmare flew through the mist. The shambling corpses were tearing through the forest like an avalanche, uprooting countless ancient pines and turning them into splinters. The thunderous clamor of it all spread far and wide, making it seem as if the entire island was falling apart.

If that would not attract the attention of the Nightmare Creature hiding in the fog, Sunny did not know what would.

'Almost there…'

He was not just running blindly. Instead, Sunny was leading his skeletal followers along the southern edge of the island, aiming to pull them to Undying Slaughter's hunting grounds, or even further west. The map of the island was shimmering in his mind, with various Nightmare Creatures moving across it according to where they were supposed to be at the moment.

It would be good to attract as many abominations as possible — the chain reaction of them abandoning the usual routes and habits was going to clear the northern part of the island, where all of the cohort's goals were, to a large degree. But Sunny was going to be happy as long as the harrowing mist wraith got implicated by the appearance of the undead stampede.

These ancient skeletons he had risen were not truly alive, and thus possessed neither souls nor soul essence. They were the worst possible enemy Undying Slaughter could meet, considering that she would not be able to replenish whatever essence she spent to destroy the murderous corpses.

…It was a bit ironic, really.

'Above us!'

His heart skipped a beat.

The dead giants had obliterated a large swath of the misty forest already, which meant that nothing hid them from the merciless gaze of the sky anymore. As Sunny watched, unnerved, long tendrils descended from somewhere high above, stretching toward the rampaging bone golems.

Before the Harvester could catch them, however, a vast shadow suddenly passed over the mass of dead giants. A moment later, the corpse of the Hollow Butterfly ascended into the sky, disappearing in the direction where the tendrils had come from.

Sunny grinned darkly.

'Godspeed!'

The creatures he had brought back to life were powerful… but, of course, not nearly as powerful as when they had been alive. The corpse of the monstrous butterfly did not possess the terrifying might of the original Great Monster… that said, it did possess the supreme body of a Great Monster.

In some senses, it was even more durable than a living Dark Butterfly would have been — the animated corpse was not alive, after all, and was thus impervious to wounds that would kill a living being.

Sunny had no hope that the Harvester would be defeated, but it definitely would be preoccupied for a while.

Now… what he had to worry about was his own survival.

Nightmare was fast, and the staggering skeletons were not the most agile of creatures. And yet, they were gaining on the galloping steed due to their sheer size. Sunny could dive into the shadows and escape at any moment, but that would defeat the purpose of leading the dead giants on a chase across the island.

A massive skeletal claw fell on him from above, missing Nightmare's side by a mere meter. The black stallion almost lost his footing when the claw slammed into the ground, making it quake and throwing a cloud of dust into the air.

'This… this is… just like that damned desert!'

The risen corpses were nowhere near as powerful as the harrowing warriors of the Nightmare Desert, but it was all the same for Sunny. It did not matter if the thing that killed him was three times more powerful than him, or three hundred times more powerful. He would end up dead either way.

Nevertheless, he kept a cool head, tracked the movements of the dead giants with shadow sense to evade the sporadic blows, and kept an eye on the misty forest ahead.

That was how Sunny managed to survive the dreadful pursuit.

Not long after the Hollow Butterfly dove into the mist above to battle the Harvester, he felt a subtle movement ahead and commanded Nightmare to dodge left. It was just in time — in the next moment, the familiar decaying shape of a giant leopard lunged forward from the fog, missing Sunny and colliding with one of the pursuing corpses.

Bits of shattered bones shot through the air like bullets, and a gurgling roar sent Sunny into a momentary daze. Then, something boomed behind him, and he sensed several massive shadows converge on the terrifying shadow of the Great Beast.

A moment later, the furious confrontation was far behind him.

But it was only the start.

As the dead army chased after the swift rider, more and more Nightmare Creatures arrived, attracted by the deafening noise of the pursuit. Sunny had calculated which abominations would arrive first, and when — as a result, he managed to evade all of them.

He saw the black octopus-like creature envelop the horrid skeleton of a crawling leviathan with its tentacles, the black acidic slime secreted by them biting into the ancient bones.

Devouring Beast made the whole island shake by landing from a high jump, her fist turning one of the dead giants into a pile of broken bones. As it was completely obliterated, the rate at which Sunny's

essence was consumed decreased a little.

A Nightmare Creature that was like a rotting tree tried to get in the way of the risen corpses, as well, but was flattened and torn apart in a matter of seconds.

There were other abominations, as well… some of them had killed Sunny before, some hadn't. Now, all of them became entangled with the murderous dead, as if receiving divine retribution for all the deaths they had visited upon him.

Undying Slaughter was among them, as well.

'I'd say… it's a success.'

By the time the abandoned port of Aletheia's Island appeared from the mist, Sunny was only followed by a few most persistent corpses. The rest had been left in the dust, fighting the various horrors of this cursed place.

Throwing one last glance at the murderous dead giants, Sunny smiled and dissolved into the shadows.

His job here was done. Now, he had to rush to the other side of the island to find Effie.

'Really, now…'

Gliding through the darkness, Sunny sighed.

'Was there a need for such a reaction? Surely, my musical talent is not that terrible…'

Chapter-1462: Smooth Ride

Eventually, Sunny reached the far side of the island. Diving out of the shadows, he staggered a little and sighed.

His reserves of essence were mostly empty. Luckily, the speed with which he was losing essence was not that great, by now… which meant that many of the risen corpses had already been destroyed by the prisoners of Aletheia's Island.

His journey across the misty forest had been much more swift and uneventful than it would have been otherwise, though, so it was well worth it. Come dusk, his essence would be replenished…

That said, he was going to have to be very careful after reaching the blood lake.

Sunny shook his head and headed forward, with Nightmare following him in the shadows. His steps were fast and silent. He crested a tall hill and jumped over a rock outcropping, then raised a hand without ever slowing down.

Catching a lightning-fast spear, Sunny grunted and slid back a few steps. Then, he walked over to Effie and nonchalantly put the spear into her hand.

"Here. You dropped this."

The huntress stared at him in bewilderment.

"...Doofus?"

He let out a mental sigh.

'Here we go again…'

Sunny patted her on the shoulder and smiled.

"Who else would it be? Yes, it's me. Before you ask… this is not the first time we're having this conversation. Actually, time moves in a circle on this island…"

He gave her a short explanation, going over the strange nature of Aletheia's Island and their plan.

"...So, in conclusion, don't feel too disappointed. I promise, I was utterly flabbergasted and thoroughly teased by you the first ten times around. Nephis, too! Anyway, Uncle Sunny is here now. You can relax."

Sunny stared at her for a moment, and then added stiffly:

"As for that guy… whatever his name is… not going to lie, I was going to give him a proper beating at first. But then I remembered that I already gave him a good slap once."

Sunny watched over the nameless Sleeper during the young soldier's First Nightmare, and welcomed him back to the waking world with a slap… just like Jet had once welcomed him.

He sighed dejectedly.

"Now that I think about it, maybe I slapped the poor guy too hard. Something has to have broken in his head for him to get with a gluttonous brute like you… so, the next time we meet, I'll probably only beat him a little…"

Effie smiled and supported her protruding belly with both hands.

"Keep talking, Uncle Sunny. If you want something to break in your head, too."

Sunny chuckled.

In all honesty, he had no desire to get violent with the nameless father of Effie's child. He just said those things to distract her from the fact that her lover was, most likely, either dead or Lost by now.

But then again… the guy had devil's luck. If anyone could pull through the winter solstice in Antarctica, it would be him.

Following a mental command, Nightmare rose from the shadows. At the same time, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer.

"In any case, there is no time to waste. The others should already be approaching the shrine I mentioned. So, we must hurry to the lake."

Effie glanced at the dark destrier with doubt.

"Uh… I'm not sure that I can ride your pony, Sunny…"

The red flames burning in Nightmare's terrifying eyes quivered. Sunny was pretty sure he had never seen his loyal Terror with such a strange expression…

'A… a pony?!'

He swallowed an indignant retort and forced out a smile.

"Who says you're going to ride my big, proud, and powerful steed?"

Taking a step to the side, he pointed to the big alloy chest standing on the ground between them.

"Climb on. That's your ride for today."

Effie studied the Covetous Coffer for a few moments, then awkwardly climbed on its lid. She flashed Sunny a grin.

"Now, what was it about riding your big and…"

Before she could finish, though, countless alloy legs appeared from beneath the large chest, rising it above ground. Surprised, Effie let out a short yelp.

Sunny grinned.

"Meet the Locomotive Chiffonier. The smoothest ride on Aletheia's Island!"

With that, he jumped into the saddle and sent Nightmare into a medium trot. The alloy chest scurried to follow them, its countless legs rustling as they tore the moss.

Effie remained seated atop the Covetous Coffer with a very strange expression on her face. Nevertheless, she seemed rather comfortable, and the speed of their small party was not at all slow.

In fact, they were moving very fast.

Most of the Nightmare Creatures inhabiting the island had been lured south by the shambling corpses, so Sunny could allow himself to head straight to the lake without any delays.

After a while, the ancient pines receded, and they came into view of a large open space.

The mist here was less thick, so Sunny stopped Nightmare at the edge of the forest. He did not want to risk attracting the Harvester's attention, even if the hidden horror of the skies had been attacked by the Hollow Butterfly not too long ago.

In front of them was a vast plane of dark crimson liquid. The lake might have been crystal clear once… but now, its waters were painted red by blood.

The source of that blood could be seen in the distance, drifting on the lake's surface. It was a gargantuan, dreadful creature that vaguely resembled a winged… something. Its dark flesh was torn and mutilated, and many horrible wounds revealed its glistening innards.

Sunny shuddered to imagine what kind of enemy could have killed the winged giant so brutally. He did know one thing, though…

The blood lake was absolutely deadly. Every time Sunny had tried to explore it, he had died in harrowing agony without even knowing what killed him. Anyone who touched the bloody water would die.

Still sitting atop the Covetous Coffer, Effie shivered.

"So… what kind of terrible abominations live in this charming lake?"

Remembering what Wind Flower had told him, Sunny stared at the crimson liquid with a dark expression.

"None... sort of."

He sighed.

"Instead, the lake itself is an abomination."

Chapter-1463: The More They Desired

Sunny studied the tranquil surface of the crimson lake, unnerved. He had died in its waters a few times, and each of those deaths was both torturous and gruesome. But now that he knew what had caused him to die, he felt even more wary of the red water than before.

Indeed… the entire blood lake was, in a sense, a Nightmare Creature. However, it was not a single living being.

Instead, there were mindless, microscopic, insatiable creatures living in the bloody water, too tiny to see and too numerous to count. Each drop of the bloody water contained millions of them. Sunny had fought and killed many abominations, from titanic behemoths to insect-like vermin that hunted in giant swarms.

However, he had never faced Nightmare Creatures that were no different from flesh-eating bacteria.

The whole lake had become a colony for these tiny horrors. Sunny did not know whether they had come from inside the giant corpse, or if the winged being simply was one of their victims. Perhaps it was both. What he did know was that the abomination's blood provided nearly endless nourishment for the tiny devourers, allowing them to propagate at astonishing speed and infect the entire lake.

Thus becoming the lake.

…No wonder he had died screaming in its crimson waters.

Sunny took a deep breath, dismounted, and gave Effie a grim look.

"Stay away from the water."

The huntress climbed off the Covetous Coffer and sighed.

"Yeah. I gathered that much… but, Sunny. How are you going to kill a lake? Short of somehow evaporating the entire thing, I don't see a way."

He hesitated.

Indeed, how was anyone supposed to kill a lake?

Sunny shook his head, then headed toward the shore.

"I don't think I can kill it. Making it out of that lake alive, though… I think I'll manage."

He manipulated the mist to cover their approach and stuck to the shadows. Tense, they made their way to the shore — Effie stayed back, but Sunny walked to the very edge of the crimson water.

The overbearing stench of blood assaulted his nostrils.

Feeling incredibly uncomfortable, Sunny took a deep breath and summoned a Memory. White sparks swirled around his hand, and soon, a beautiful chalice of white jade appeared in his hand, overflowing with sinister black liquid.

The Bitter Cusp… a cup of poison that the Jade Queen had once served her rapacious guests. Despite the fact that Sunny had started his Awakened career as a poisoner, he did not use this Memory often. One of the times he had, it was to coat the arrows and bullets of the First Evacuation Army soldiers with the Black Venom. It helped them a lot during the mad dash to Falcon Scott...

But who knew it would come in handy today?

Sending all five of his shadows to wrap themselves around the Bitter Cusp, Sunny tilted it and watched as a stream of black liquid fell into the crimson water. The poison flowed and flowed.

'The mistress of the palace herself presented them with a cup of the sweetest nectar. No matter how much of the sweet nectar they drank, the cup remained full. The more of it they consumed, the more of it

they desired…'

The words of the description of the sinister Memory surfaced in his mind.

Indeed, no matter how much of the glossy black liquid he poured into the lake, it continued to flow. There was no doubt that more of it had flowed out of the Bitter Cusp than the jade chalice was supposed to contain. There was no explanation for where the poison was coming from, not that he needed one.

Endless Spring was always like that, as were many Memories. Mundane logic almost never applied to how they functioned.

Sunny did not need an explanation, though. All he needed was for the blood lake to drink as much of the poison as there was.

After a while, it seemed as though the crimson waters had become restless. Subtle ripples spread over the lake's surface, and shallow waves licked its shore. Forcing himself to stay still, Sunny threw over the shoulder:

"Step back."

Effie obediently waddled a few steps away from him and grew still. He did not move a centimeter, though, no matter how much he wanted to, and continued to pour the black poison into the water.

As time went on, the blood lake started to look more and more eerie. Its crimson waters seemed to be tinted a subtly darker shade now, and rippled silently. Although there was no wind, the waves rolling across the surface of the lake were becoming more noticeable.

Sunny took a deep breath.

He knew that only about half an hour had passed, but it felt like an eternity. Finally, the stream of poison grew thinner, then thinner still. Then, it broke, and only a few stray drops of the black liquid fell down.

The Bitter Cusp was empty.

"Well. That's done."

Standing some distance away, Effie asked:

"Now that you've poisoned this lake so thoroughly… what are you going to do next?"

Sunny dismissed Ananke's Mantle and gave her a dark look.

After a few moments of silence, he said:

"What do you think? Now, I'm going to go for a swim."

Effie's eyes grew round.

"What? Swimming in an abominable lake wasn't enough, so you decided to add deadly poison to the soup first?"

He couldn't suppress a short laugh.

"Well, I am immune to most poisons. It's going to sting a bit, for sure, but with some luck… it will be alright."

He sighed, then dismissed the Bitter Cusp and called the five shadows back. Evaluating how much essence he had left, Sunny then opened the gate of the Shadow Lantern and manifested the Shadowspawn Shell around his body. Summoning the Mantle to cover it with a layer of onyx armor, he reinforced that armor with five layers of augmentation, and then gave Effie a wink.

She seemed to pale a little at the sight.

"I'm off. There is some food in the Coffer… I told it not to bite your hands off, so feel free to explore."

With that, Sunny cursed inwardly…

And dove into the hungry, man-eating lake.

Chapter-1464: Sunny Submarine

Wrapped in the protective shell of shadows and the onyx carapace of the Mantle, Sunny breathed with the help of the Essence Pearl and fell into the murky depths. He had swum away from the shore and then manipulated his weight to plunge down like a rock. The water pressing down on him was crimson and dark.

It was also poisoned and teeming with myriads of invisible, gluttonous horrors.

'Ah…'

He didn't like it at all.

The poison of the Bitter Cusp had spread far, by now, and should have killed numerous microscopic creatures that permeated the bloody water. The rest should have been weakened, as well. But was it enough to save him?

Sunny was going to find out soon.

'I haven't received any fragments, either... what a scam...'

His Shadow Shell was like a diving suit, with no gaps or seams that could allow the terrifying tiny creatures to reach his flesh. The Mantle covering the Shell was like a layer of armor, reinforced five times over by his shadows. In a sense, Sunny was like a miniature submarine… his task, accordingly, was to explore the bottom of the lake without being crushed and swallowed by its depths.

However…

He could already feel myriads of tiny teeth — or whatever it was that the invisible horrors had instead of teeth — gnawing at his black carapace. The Mantle was holding, at least for now, but the Shell was

sustaining damage. It was as if its outer surface was slowly dissolving and being washed away by the crimson water.

'That's… pretty bad.'

Feeling the lake starting to devour and digest his shell, Sunny felt cold horror wash over him. However, he managed to maintain his composure. In fact, the situation was better than he had expected. Sure, his improvised diving suit was being devoured… but at a much slower rate than usual.

The poison of the Bitter Cusp was doing its job.

As long as the Mantle held and the exposed surface of the Shadow Shell was limited, he could repair it faster than the lake was destroying it. Even if his onyx armor started to crack and disintegrate, he would be able to keep up with the relentless attrition for a while.

Summoning more shadows from the Lantern, Sunny went about mending the dissolving form of the Shadowspawn. At the same time, his feet touched the bottom of the lake. Pushing himself through the water, he walked forward.

Surrounded by the crimson gloom — and incalculable amount of abominable microscopic killers — he advanced deeper into the blood lake. Its bottom was strangely smooth and regular, hinting at its artificial origin. Well, the whole island was artificial, so Sunny should not have been surprised that this lake, too, had been created by Aletheia of the Nine instead of appearing naturally.

He… was starting to feel nervous.

Wind Flower had described what he had to find and what he needed to do, but she did not know the precise location of their goal. So, Sunny had to search for it himself. Depending on his luck, the search could take a relatively small amount of time, or last very long… the former was fine, but the latter meant certain death.

He did not have a lot of essence left to maintain the Shadow Shell, after all.

'Damn it…'

The deeper into the lake Sunny walked, the harder it became to advance. The rock surface under his feet was still smooth, angled down at a shallow angle, but there were more and more obstacles in his path. These obstacles… were the remains of numerous Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny had thought that the bone orchard was the only monster graveyard on the island, but he was wrong. It seemed that the blood lake was the place that Aletheia had used to dispose of the carcasses of most abominations she slayed.

He couldn't help but notice that the towering remains he had to either climb over or walk around had all belonged to Nightmare Creatures that were not made of flesh and bone. Instead, these had been abominations whose monstrous bodies had been composed of steel, stone, clay, glass, and all kinds of different materials.

'What a treasury…'

Sensing his Shell starting to crumble faster and faster, vivid signs of corrosion appearing on the onyx plates of the Mantle, Sunny tried to distract himself from fear by thinking how great it would have been, to feed all these dead Nightmare Creatures to Fiend.

Sadly, the gluttonous Shadow had no chance of surviving the crimson depths of the blood lake. Even if his armor was in no way inferior to Sunny's Mantle, Fiend was a living being — the invisible killers living in the red water would have instantly infiltrated his body and devoured it from the inside out.

'If these are the corpses that are too tough for the lake to digest… then just how many dead abominations have been erased by it entirely?'

Had this harrowing place been created by Aletheia of the Nine… to dispose of trash?

The thought seemed darkly funny.

'More reason not to die here.'

The Shadowspawn Shell was falling apart. By now, the speed of its destruction was only barely slower than the speed with which Sunny was repairing it. The Mantle was on the verge of crumbling, as well. When it did… the shell would start to dissolve much faster.

In the end, Sunny would be devoured by the lake.

'Where the hell is it… where is it?'

He forced his way through the crimson murk, trying not to panic. The bottom of the lake was almost flat now, showing that he was close to its center. That was the place where what he sought was most likely located…

Sunny was almost ready to drown in despair when he finally saw it.

In front of him, something rose above the rock surface of the lake's bottom. It was a large circle of dark steel, a dozen meters in diameter. There were no runes engraved into the ancient metal, and there was nothing laying on its surface.

'Finally!'

Sunny laboriously made his way to the steel circle hidden at the bottom of the lake and stopped near it. The metal ring was raised above the surface of the rock by about half a meter. It was hard to see any details in the crimson darkness, so Sunny simply felt its shape with shadow sense.

He hesitated for a few moments, then summoned the Sin of Solace.

There was a thin, almost invisible seam between the outer metal ring and the steel circle encompassed by it. Sunny cautiously inserted the jade jian into that seam and remained motionless for a second or two, gathering his courage.

Then, he called the shadows back from the surface of the Mantle and wrapped them around his body. Feeling his strength soar, Sunny ignored the net of cracks that immediately started to spread through his onyx armor, and pulled at the hilt of the Sin of Solace with all his might.

He was trying to dislodge the steel circle from the metal ring it was resting in.

Sunny used all his power, pulling and pulling…

His shell was being swiftly devoured by the tiny horrors of the blood lake.

The Mantle was being corroded at a dire speed, ready to crack apart.

The steel circle did not move.

'Argh!'

Sunny felt like his muscles were about to explode, but then, finally, he felt the ancient steel give. The heavy circle rose above the metal ring by a centimeter, then a few centimeters more. Without wasting any time, Sunny plunged the Sin of Solace deeper, changed its angle, and continued to pull.

The lake was suddenly in mayhem all around him.

And then, finally, the impossibly heavy steel lid rose above the metal ring. Letting go of his sword, Sunny grabbed its edge with all four of his hands, grunted, and raised the lid as high as he could while displacing a great amount of water.

Standing on the metal ring, Sunny supported the lid with his shoulder and glanced down.

Below him… was nothing.

Or rather, a long vertical shaft cut through the bedrock that led to nothing.

He was looking at the abyss below the island.

And all around him, the crimson water of the blood lake was already rushing into the hidden drain, falling into that abyss from a great height.

The power of the current almost threw Sunny down, as well, but he

somehow managed to hold on. As time passed, the pressure grew more and more terrible, as more and more water fell from the bottom of the island into unfathomable darkness like a red waterfall.

'Ah… hell. My shoulder hurts.'

Eventually, Sunny gritted his teeth and threw the lid of the drain sluice entirely open, then staggered back.

By then, the water was only high enough to reach up to his shoulders.

Some time later, it disappeared entirely, leaving him standing on wet rock.

The blood lake… was gone. Its crimson waters, and all the tiny horrors populating it, had been drained into the lightless abyss under the levitating island.

Standing at the bottom of a vast bowl cut into the stone soil of Aletheia's Island, Sunny sighed and looked up.

Out there, far away, on the former shore of the lake, Effie was looking down at him with a strange expression.

He remained motionless for a moment, then raised a hand and waved at her.

Inside the shredded Shadow Shell, Sunny's face was pale.

He had survived... somehow.

'Yeah. Let's not do anything like that again...'

Chapter-1465: Rendezvous

Sunny remained motionless for a while, looking around.

The bottom of the lake was dry now, revealing the towering remains of the ancient Nightmare Creatures. Well… relatively dry. Although most of the water had been drained into the dark abyss, large puddles of it still remained here and there.

The remains of the abominations were still glistening with moisture, as well.

Which meant that countless invisible horrors were still crawling all over their surface. He was not going to feed Fiend with these abandoned treasures any time soon.

'Damnation.'

Sunny's shell was still being eroded, as well. Luckily, the rate at which it was dissolving had decreased drastically. By now, he would be able to climb out of the empty lake and discard his ragged diving suit without being eaten alive.

Looking up, he saw the mist slowly flowing down the slopes of the former lake. Very soon, it was going to shroud everything here, just like everywhere else on the island. Turning slightly, Sunny stared at the corpse of the giant winged creature and fought the temptation to try and fish the soul shards out of it.

But no, there was no time, and the corpse still gave him a sense of danger… there had to be countless invisible creatures permeating it, after all. Even if the dead abomination was not the original source of the contamination, it was without a doubt being slowly devoured from the inside by it.

Finally, Sunny glanced at the slope of the lakeshore.

There, not obscured by the crimson water anymore, several dark openings were revealed, each a few meters in diameter. Those were the aqueducts that used to feed water into the moat of Aletheia's Tower.

Now that the lake had been drained… the moat would soon run dry, as well, dealing the first blow to the system of enchantments maintaining the time loop. Which meant that Sunny's mission here was accomplished.

He hesitated for a few moments, then threw one last glance at the darkness hiding beneath the island. Struggling against the sudden sense of vertigo, Sunny walked to where the lid of the sluice gate was laying on the wet stone, gathered his strength, and threw it back in place with a grunt.

The massive steel circle fell back into the metal ring with a loud ringing sound, obscuring the lightless abyss. Immediately, Sunny felt a little calmer.

'I should hurry up.'

His essence was running dry, and there was still some time left until dusk.

He dashed to the shore, mentally reviewing his performance. In retrospect, he could have saved himself some trouble by exploring the bottom of the lake as a shadow first, then returning to the shore, safely forming the Shadow Shell away from the deadly crimson water, and using Shadow Step to return to the gate.

But he had not known if there were unknown dangers hiding in the lake. Provided the information he had possessed at the time… his strategy might not have been optimal, but it had been the safest.

'I succeeded, didn't I?'

Climbing onto the shore, Sunny dismissed the Mantle, and then used Shadow Step to escape from inside the damaged Shadowspawn Shell. The towering figure of the four-armed fiend remained standing in the mist like a hollow statue.

Appearing a safe distance away, near Effie, Sunny shivered and summoned his clothes back. Finally, he allowed the Shadow Shell to dissolve into nothingness.

The huntress gave him a long look.

"So, you just… flushed the entire lake?"

Sunny smiled weakly.

"I guess you can say that."

Then, he looked at the sea of mist one last time and turned away.

"In any case, our job here is done. Next, we need to rendezvous with Nephis, Cassie, and Jet."

Climbing into Nightmare's saddle, he hid his expression and sighed quietly.

Diving into the blood lake had been dangerous… but what Cassie had to do in the overgrown shrine was much more dangerous by far.

'I hope they are alright.'

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Aletheia's Island was strangely peaceful. Most of the Nightmare Creatures had left their usual haunts, attracted by the havoc that the dead army had wreaked on the southern shore. Of course, the risen corpses had all been destroyed by now, and the dreadful abominations were on their way back north.

Nevertheless, Sunny and Effie had a narrow window of time to slip to the rendezvous point without meeting any obstacles.

Eventually, they reached the maw of the wide chasm that had given Sunny so much trouble in the past. Dismissing Nightmare and the Covetous coffer, he led Effie to its edge, and helped her glide to the bottom with the help of the Dark Wing.

Down there, the rocks walls of the chasm were emanating searing

heat, and the stench of burned chitin was almost unbearable. The charred corpses of the revolting millipedes crunched under their feet like autumn leaves and crumbled into ash. Despite the fact that Sunny was used to this scene, he still felt nauseated.

Effie looked sickened, as well. Covering her nose, she asked:

"...What the hell happened here?"

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Nephis happened."

The huntress stared at him for a moment, then coughed, understanding.

The two of them made their way into the deeper part of the canyon, trying not to look around. Soon, they saw a dim light ahead.

Sunny tensed when he recognized the soft radiance of the Guiding Light, but then let out a sigh of relief.

Five figures were there, in the shadow of a large rock outcropping. One was standing, one was sprawled on the ground, and three were sitting tiredly, their backs leaning against the rocks.

Saint was the one standing. Her onyx armor seemed strangely brittle and dull, but there were not many cracks on it, as well as very little ruby dust smeared across its surface. Fiend was the one sprawled on the ground… the infernal flames burning in his eyes were much dimmer than usual, but there was no damage on his black silver armor.

In any case, he was alive.

Nephis, Cassie, and Jet were in one piece, too. They seemed pale and strangely listless, but there were no terrible wounds on their bodies, nor was there much blood on their clothes.

They had pulled through.

Chapter-1466: Hidden Chamber

Sunny and Effie approached them quietly.

"Hey! Long time no see!"

Effie's energetic voice echoes across the canyon, prompting a weak response from the three Masters. Cassie flinched slightly, while Nephis and Jet turned to look at them with dim expressions. After a moment of silence, Soul Reaper forced out a smile.

"Ah. It's you, glutton… yeah, it's good to see you too."

The three were clearly shaken by their experience in the overgrown shrine. Sunny only knew that the creature that dwelled there was powerful and ancient — even Wind Flower did not know much about it, except for the fact that it did not possess a physical body. Therefore, Jet's glaive and Neph's purifying flames were their best bet to destroy it.

With Cassie's supernatural intuition and affinity to revelations, as well as Saint's dark blade, they stood a good chance of, if not prevailing against the shrine horror, then at least getting the enchantment key and escaping alive.

Walking over to the three Masters, Sunny studied their conditions for a few moments, then turned to Cassie:

"Did you get it?"

She nodded slowly and raised a hand. On it lay a strange gemstone engraved with countless runes. Unlike the soul crystal of the Guiding Light, this gemstone seemed to absorb light, not produce it.

The enchantment key.

Sunny let out a long sigh.

"...Good."

Then, fascinated, he asked in a curious tone:

"What was the creature inside the shrine like?"

Cassie shivered slightly and lowered her head.

"I… don't really want to talk about that thing. Right now."

Judging by the heavy expressions of Neph's and Jet's faces, they felt the same.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'Just how bad was it?'

Nephis was so out of it that she had not even reacted to Effie's protruding belly.

Nevertheless, he did not press the topic. The three of them had experienced all kinds of terrible things and faced all sorts of harrowing creatures… if they were that shaken by what had happened in the overgrown shrine, it must have been pretty bad. If so, he should be satisfied by the fact that they had made it out alive.

Cassie's two Echoes were nowhere to be seen, though. Hopefully, they were just damaged and not destroyed.

"Alright, then. Let's go… we should hurry."

They lingered for a while, then rose silently.

Soon, the cohort traversed the deep chasm and entered the caverns. The Terror that had created them was already dead — Cassie's group had slayed it on the way to the shrine. Sunny navigated the system of caves, following his memory. After a long time, they stopped near the wall of a cave that did not seem different from all the other ones they had passed.

However, this one was special.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then looked up with apprehension. Eventually, he took a step to the side and sent his shadows to augment Saint.

"If you will…"

The graceful knight spared him an indifferent gaze, then walked forward and delivered a devastating blow to the wall of the cave. A net of cracks spread from the point where her gauntlet had struck the weathered rock.

Saint did not stop there, though. Without wasting any time, she bombarded the wall of the cave with crushing blows, each sending a thunderous boom traveling through the caverns.

Sunny covered his ears and winced. By his side, the other members of the cohort did the same. Only Fiend just stood there and stared, dim flames burning in his eyes.

Eventually, the wall collapsed, revealing an empty space beyond. White mist streamed into the cave through the opening, as well as a few thin streams of water.

Sunny gently pulled Nephis away from them.

"Follow me."

The open space beyond the broken cave wall… was the chasm of the tower's moat.

Now that the water was gone, it was empty. The deadly field of twisted time had disappeared, as well. In other words, they did not have to cross the enchanted bridge anymore — instead, they could cross the moat wherever they wished.

There was also no need to traverse the central area of the island, which teemed with harrowing Nightmare Creatures by now. Instead of risking their lives in the misty forest, the cohort had come to the black cliff from below.

They exited the caverns through the breach made by Saint, descended to the bottom of the moat, and made their way to its other side. Then, they scaled its vertical wall and climbed out of the chasm near the stone steps leading to the gate of the tower.

The wide bridge was now behind them, the terrifying abominations frozen on it still standing motionless. The runes carved into the sides of the cliff were still intact.

The cohort ascended the stone steps without looking back. Sunny opened the gate of Aletheia's Tower and let everyone inside, then closed it behind them.

Turning around, he saw that Nephis, Jet, and Effie had frozen, looking at the corpse of the Great Tyrant with complicated expressions. He could understand how they felt… he had been quite the same the first time he saw the dreadful corpse, after all.

Sunny sighed.

"It's dead. Don't worry…"

He told them not to worry, but was feeling agitated himself. Sunny was almost surprised that they had made it so far… the bone orchard, the caverns, the blood lake, the overgrown shrine — all of these steps could have ended in their deaths.

And yet, somehow, the plan he and Cassie had concocted went without a hitch. All the deaths they had experienced on this nightmarish island had not been for nothing, it seemed. Now, all that was left was to gain access to the secret chamber of the tower.

And destroy the loop.

Glancing at Cassie, he nodded and walked to the center of the hall. She followed, holding the enchantment key in her small fist.

When the two of them found themselves directly below the corpse of the Great Tyrant hanging from the ceiling, there was a strange sound, and the stones beneath their feet suddenly moved. That had never happened before… because they had never had the runic gemstone with them.

As the other members of the cohort approached, the floor of the tower rearranged itself, revealing a narrow staircase. Without saying anything, they descended into the basement of Aletheia's Tower.

There, a small spherical chamber was carved into the rock. Its walls were covered with sheets of polished metal, its surface etched with countless runes.

At the center of the chamber…

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

A large, jagged piece of black rock was hovering in the air, radiating a sense of cold. It did not look special in any way… except for the fact that it was very similar to the Estuary Key.

In fact, he would not be surprised if his little chunk of black stone and this larger one had come from the same source.

'...What the hell?'

While Sunny was standing still, his thoughts in turmoil, Cassie silently approached the hovering boulder and walked around it. Eventually, she stooped, noticing a socket on the weathered black surface.

The socket perfectly fit the size of the runic gemstone she was holding in her hand.

The blind girl lingered, then turned to face them.

"I… I am going to insert the key now."

The members of the cohort nodded solemnly.

Cassie hesitated for a bit more, then gently pushed the gemstone into the socket.

Nothing happened for a few moments.

Then, the levitating piece of black rock trembled slightly… and fell to the floor of the chamber. It collided with the metal sheet and rolled a

few times, raising a loud clangor.

When the echoes of the collision subsided, the cohort was left in dead silence.

Sunny took a deep breath. He could feel it — something had just changed about Aletheia's Island. A vague feeling that had been pressing down on his mind for so long that he had grown used to it was gone.

They… they actually did it.

They broke the cycle of twisted time that had reigned this place for centuries.

The loop was gone.

Chapter-1467: Just Like That

The members of the cohort remained silent for a few long moments, staring at the chunk of black rock with complicated expressions. Perhaps for most of them, what had just happened in the small spherical chamber did not hold a lot of meaning… but for Sunny and Cassie, it did.

Especially for him.

Letting out a shaky breath, Sunny suddenly felt like his legs were about to give out. Taking a step back, he swayed slightly and lowered himself to the first step of the narrow stairs. His eyes were still glued to the fallen black stone, but his gaze had become distant.

Cassie leaned on the Guiding Light, her face motionless.

Nephis, Jet, and Effie watched them silently.

After a while, the huntress finally spoke:

"So… it's done? Just like that?"

Sunny looked up at her, struggling to answer.

'Just like that?'

She made it sound as if it had been easy. Well, of course... she had just learned about the existence of the loop this morning, and it was gone before dusk.

For him, however…

The memories of the countless harrowing deaths he had experienced and witnessed on Aletheia's Island flooded Sunny's mind. That first time being cruelly executed by Undying Slaughter… the hopeless despair of watching Devouring Beast's giant hand descend from the

mist… and so much more.

All of it was behind him now, but not gone. Sunny wished he could have forgotten all this torment, like he had forgotten most of the nightmares about the Kingdom of Hope. But he couldn't. These memories were going to haunt him forever.

'They can stand in line and wait their turn.'

There was a vast museum of heartbreak and horror in his memory, already. What could a few more nightmares do?

He sighed, then nodded.

"Yes… the loop is destroyed. I can feel it."

Effie lingered for a moment.

"Uh… good, then. What's the plan now?"

Just as she said these words, Sunny felt something move in his soul, and a flood of essence poured into his cores. Somewhere outside the island, the seven suns were plunging into the Great River… it was dusk.

He relaxed a little.

The loop was destroyed, which was a great relief. However, it also meant that the future was once again unknown and unpredictable — Sunny felt much calmer now that his reserves of essence were swiftly replenishing.

Cassie kept quiet, so he answered Effie's question himself:

"It's like I told you before. We will hide in this tower and wait out the immediate aftermath of our actions. In the next few days, Aletheia's Island is going to be a battlefield… Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast are going to go on a rampage."

He paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"Or rather, their rampage will continue, uninterrupted. They will

either eradicate most of the Nightmare Creatures on the island, or be eradicated by them. In any case, we must ensure that these Defiled versions of you and Jet never return to the Great River."

Sunny had fought both the mist wraith and the bestial giantess many times. He died when he fought alone… he watched his companions die before being killed himself when fighting side-by-side with his allies. The Plagues were simply too dreadful to be defeated by them.

But that was inside the loop. Now that the loop was broken, the Flaws of the Defiled Saints could finally be exploited. Devouring Beast's hunger and Undying Slaughter's need to kill would become their undoing…

In theory.

In practice, it was not going to be easy to exploit these Flaws. Devouring Beast, especially, was going to have plenty of things to eat. Undying Slaughter was going to have plenty of things to kill, as well, but she could potentially expend a lot of essence in the process.

But this was a problem for another day.

For now, Sunny wanted to rest.

When was the last time he slept? He couldn't even remember… which was not a good sign.

'A tired mind makes mistakes.'

He had no doubt he had made many mistakes already. Luckily, none of them had been serious enough to doom them — for now. Cassie had to be just as exhausted.

All in all, the two of them had done remarkably well, considering the situation.

Sunny took a deep breath, then stood up and looked around the spherical chamber one last time.

"For now, let's return to the first floor of the tower. We'll be spending the next few days, maybe even weeks there. We should clean it up, if

nothing else."

They made their way above ground, where blood, rubble, and ghastly remains of the Great Tyrant's minions littered the floor. The Tyrant itself was still hanging from the broken ceiling, the terrible wounds dealt to it by the Serpent King in the distant past still as fresh as if they had been delivered a few hours ago.

Effie stared at the terrible corpse with apprehension.

"What is that thing, though?"

Sunny glanced at her, then forced out a smile.

"What else? That's your food for the foreseeable future."

The huntress visibly paled.

"Huh? Wait… you're not serious, are you?"

He shrugged helplessly.

"Why wouldn't I be serious? Weren't you jealous that Nephis and I feasted on the meat of a Great Monster? Well, here's an actual Great Tyrant! No need to thank me…"

Effie was so stunned that she actually stammered:

"B—but… but… wait, when was I ever jealous..."

Jet patted her on the shoulder and grinned.

"Bon appétit."

With that, the five of them went about cleaning the first floor of Aletheia's Tower. Sunny positioned several of his shadows to keep watch, knowing that this place was not as safe as it had been before. It was still impossible to cross the bridge, but the twisted currents of time that had been protecting the moat were gone now.

In theory, any Nightmare Creature could reach the tower with some effort. Getting inside was an entirely different matter, but it was

better to be safe than sorry.

They cleared the rubble, incinerated the remains of the Tyrant's minions, and washed the blood off the stone floor. The interior of Aletheia's Tower had not become cozy or comforting after that, but it was already better than many places the members of the cohort had camped at in the past.

Jet and Effie, who had not spent a night on solid ground since entering the Nightmare, were especially appreciative of this stone shelter.

For once, things were looking up for the cohort.

Chapter-1468: An Extravagant Meal

It was already deep into the night by the time the hall was clean enough for them to make camp in one of its less damaged corners.

Everyone was bone-tired and ready to topple over — Sunny and Cassie had been suffering in the loop for a long time, while for Effie and Jet, this terrible day had come straight after surviving the evisceration of their tribe and being chased by the Drowned for an entire week.

Nephis, meanwhile, was mentally and physically drained because of how much she had used her Aspect today.

Sunny left his companions in the corner of the hall designated as their camp and walked over to the corpse of the Great Tyrant. While they were making a fire, he manifested a raised platform from the shadows and went about extracting the five Supreme soul shards from the horrid corpse. Luck was on his side — King Daeron had neglected to collect them after slaying the creature.

Perhaps he had been in a hurry to leave Aletheia's Island, or perhaps such things had no value for the mighty Sovereign. In any case, it was Sunny's win.

Soon, he returned to his companions carrying five radiant crystals and a generous chunk of monster meat.

It was the meat of a Great abomination, as well… despite the divine taste, chewing it was not going to be easy for Cassie and Jet. Nephis, Effie, and himself would have to augment themselves with their Aspects to enjoy the meal, as well.

While Nephis went about preparing the extravagant meal, Sunny

wiped the soul shards clean, summoned the Covetous Coffer, and stored them inside. At that time, Jet gave him a long look.

"There's enough meat to feed Effie for a long time."

He nodded. Soul Reaper lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"What about me? How am I going to last longer than Undying Slaughter here, inside the tower?"

Sunny frowned.

This was indeed an issue. Both Jet and Undying Slaughter could only exist for as long as there was essence in their fractured soul cores. Neither could generate essence naturally, and would only replenish it by killing living beings.

The mist wraith had many more creatures to kill out there, in the dreadful reaches of Aletheia's Island. Of course, she would also have to burn some essence to prevail against them. Still… Jet was at a disadvantage while locked inside the tower.

He had a solution, though… hopefully, he did.

Lowering his hand into the open maw of the Covetous Coffer, Sunny took out a beautiful golden fruit. The fruit looked clean, ripe, and delicious… tantalizing, really. Its refreshing fragrance made him want to sink his teeth into the soft, succulent flesh of the fruit right that instant.

The fruit, of course, had come from the sacred tree growing on the deck of the Chain Breaker.

In fact, Sunny had plucked all the fruits from its branches before leaving the ship in the morning.

Suppressing the gnawing desire to devour the golden fruit, Sunny threw it to Jet.

"Try it."

She caught the fruit and looked at it in confusion. Then, she shrugged

and took a generous bite.

The rest of them watched Jet consume the fruit of the sacred tree with envy. By the time it was gone, a stunned expression appeared on her face.

"I… I just received an infusion of essence. A lot of it!"

Sunny nodded in satisfaction.

'Thank the gods. It works.'

He had tried eating the golden fruits during one of the revolutions. Sunny was understandably afraid of them, considering what had happened to him on the Ashen Barrow. By now, it was clear that the Soul Devouring Tree was somehow connected to the sacred tree that grew on the Chain Breaker — and had come from Heart God's desecrated grove.

…And perhaps to the strange tree to which Eurys of the Nine had been nailed in punishment.

However, there was a big difference between the Soul Devourer and Chain Breaker's mystical tree — apart from the fact that the former was thousands of years old and a Nightmare Creature. It was that the Soul Devourer fed on living beings, while their tree didn't.

As a result, while the fruits of the Soul Devourer could grant Awakened soul fragments, the fruits of the young sacred tree couldn't. Instead… they were brimming with soul essence.

Sunny had used them a few times to help Nephis recover from essence exhaustion faster, but in the grand scheme of things, it was of not much use. Especially because they had no visible effect on him, due to the fact that his soul required shadow essence instead of soul essence.

It was also why Sunny was not sure that the golden fruits would have any effect on Jet, considering how unique her soul was, even when compared to his.

Luckily, everything seemed to work fine. Otherwise, he would have

had to take Jet outside the tower to hunt in the next few days, risking both their lives.

Sunny let out a sigh of relief.

There were a good dozen fruits inside the coffer, some of them riper than the others. They would last Jet a good deal of time.

A pale smile appeared on his face.

"Good. That's good. I have a bunch of these with me… so, don't worry about getting enough essence for now."

Jet threw a long look at the Covetous Coffer, then nodded.

Soon, their late supper was ready. Effie and the rest of them consumed the sublime meat of the Great Tyrant as they struggled to stay awake. Then, just before dawn, they finally allowed themselves to succumb to exhaustion and went to sleep on the cold stone floor.

…Everyone except for Sunny, that was.

He lingered for a while, sitting silently on a piece of rubble. His gaze was hollow and grim.

Soon, Sunny felt the enchantment of the Crown of Twilight come to life once again, replenishing his essence once more.

It was dawn.

Which meant that now, there was absolutely no doubt that the loop had indeed been destroyed. He had already known it, of course, but still waited for the former termination point to arrive… just to be sure.

The dawn came and went, but Sunny was still sitting on the piece of rubble inside Aletheia's Tower. He was not sent back to the deck of the Chain Breaker.

Motionless as a statue, Sunny let out a long sigh.

Then, he slowly looked up.

There, far above… Wind Flower was waiting for him.

Now that the loop was no more, it was time for him to fulfill his oath.

With a heavy heart, Sunny looked at his sleeping companions, then stood up.

The deep shadows drowning the great hall of Aletheia's Tower stirred and moved, restless, as he walked away from their little camp.

Chapter-1469: Something to Remember

So much had happened since the last time Sunny had seen Wind Flower, but the spacious chamber at the top of Aletheia's Tower was still the same. Dozens of lanterns floated in the air, shining with a warm orange light. The world outside the window was dim and dark. The silken canopy of the wooden bed was half-transparent, revealing the delicate shape of the beautiful sleeping Saint.

Sunny ascended the stairs and remained motionless for a while, looking at the vague silhouette with a heavy expression. Then, he sighed and shifted his perception, peering into Wind Flower's soul.

There, the seed of the repulsive darkness had already grown larger.

'So fast.'

Corruption was spreading so fast. Its seed had been like a tiny speck before, but now, it was already like a pearl. If Sunny did not act soon, the darkness would spread and consume Wind Flower's soul entirely.

There was no time to waste.

And yet… he could not simply kill her. At least not without talking to the beautiful Saint one last time.

Dissolving into the shadows, he allowed Nightmare to bring him to her dream.

Soon, Sunny found himself standing on a tall cliff overlooking the vast expanse of the Great River. The seven suns were slowly rising from the flowing water. The tranquil expanse of Aletheia's Island was shrouded in the dim twilight of the early dawn.

Wind Flower was standing at the edge of the cliff with her back to him, gazing at the water. A cool breeze was playing with her wavy hair, and her azure robe looked like the midnight sky in the dimness of dawn. Sensing his approach, she shifted slightly and let out a quiet sigh.

"So, you have succeeded?"

Sunny froze for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes. The loop… is gone. We destroyed it."

She turned around and looked at him. Then, a soft smile illuminated her enchanting face.

"How marvelous. And on your first try, no less."

He walked over to stand beside her on the edge of the cliff. Looking at the dreamlike expanse of the Great River, Sunny said darkly:

"First try? It might have been, but I spent an eternity preparing for it. Months of torment… countless deaths… all for this single moment. I wouldn't call it marvelous."

Wind Flower studied his face silently, then looked away and sighed.

"Countless deaths, huh? Dying once does not sound so terrible, in comparison."

She paused before asking:

"You haven't forgotten what you swore to do, have you?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"I remember."

The beautiful Saint fell quiet. A few moments passed before she spoke again, her voice losing some of its usual lightness:

"After it's done… burn my body. I don't want anything to sprout from my corpse and walk around wearing my skin. Find a strong flame to

burn it."

Sunny had no response, so he simply nodded. Wind Flower took a deep breath, then took a step back from the edge and laughed.

"Don't be so serious, Sunless. I lived a long life… far too long, really. Gods, I am older than my grandmother was when she passed away — by a few centuries, at least. Ah, these old bones of mine have had enough."

Shaking her head, she walked to the edge of the forest and put her hand on the trunk of an ancient pine.

"Are you going to visit Twilight before sailing for Verge?"

Following her into the forest, Sunny nodded again.

"We are planning to, yes. The last two members of my cohort are there. We hope to find something else to help us in Twilight, as well."

Wind Flower lingered for a few moments.

"Good. That crown you wear will be of help if the city still stands. It is another enchantment key, in a sense… the defensive array that was meant to protect the city will recognize you as its ruler. You'll have to reach my father's throne to take control, though."

Sunny looked at her back and asked grimly:

"The defensive array?"

She shrugged.

"It was a grand enchantment that my father and our best sorcerers created. They had to have improved it a lot after I was gone, so I'm not sure what the exact effect of the array is now. It should be similar to what Aletheia had done. You saw the black stone in the hidden chamber of the tower, yes?"

He frowned.

"...Yes."

Wind Flower smiled.

"That stone… is very special. There were only a few of them found by the River People. These fragments are said to have absorbed the essence of time, and so, the rumor is that they come from the Estuary. The defensive array of Twilight is built upon a fragment of the Estuary, too."

Sunny shivered, not knowing if it was wise to deal directly with anything that had come from the Estuary. Wasn't that where the Defilement had come from?

Then, he frowned, thinking about the Estuary Key that rested peacefully within his soul. It looked very similar to the black stone of Aletheia's Tower. Where had the Mad Prince procured a piece of the Estuary?

…Had the vile madman actually been to that harrowing place?

The two of them entered a small clearing. Green moss covered the ground there, with shallow puddles of water glowing softly in the gentle light of dawn. Wind Flower slowed her steps and hesitated for a few moments, then crouched and outstretched her hand.

In front of her, a beautiful azure flower was growing from a shallow pond. Its lotus-like petals glistened with drops of dew, and its subtle fragrance was pure and intoxicating. She touched its stalk gently, then broke the blossom off and stood up.

Turning around, the charming Saint smiled and presented the lotus flower to Sunny.

"Here. Take it."

He hesitated for a moment, then accepted the azure blossom and looked at it in confusion. They were in a dream, so he could not take anything with him back to Aletheia's Tower.

"What is it for?"

Wind Flower laughed.

"Just something to remember me by. What, has no one ever given you flowers, Sunless?"

Sunny silently shook his head, prompting her to smile.

"Well, then. I'll be the first. That way, you definitely won't forget."

With that, Wind Flower looked at him with bright sparks dancing in her eyes.

Then, however, the smile slowly disappeared from her lips. The beautiful Saint sighed.

"...You should go now. I don't think I can hold on for much longer."

Sunny held the azure blossom, staring at her silently.

Wind Flower looked away and lingered for a while. Then, she said quietly:

"If, by chance, you ever meet the real me out there in the Dream Realm… tell her… tell her that I did my best. Tell her that we all did."

He lowered his head, and nodded slowly.

"I promise."

It... was a heavy promise to make. Of course, the real… the original Wind Flower had almost certainly been dead for countless years. And yet, by promising to pass along this message in case she was somehow still alive, Sunny was also promising to return to the Dream Realm.

Which meant that he was promising to conquer this Nightmare, as well.

Wind Flower smiled, then turned away and looked up, at the rays of sunshine falling through the crowns of the ancient pines.

"Farewell, Sunless. Go… you don't have much time left."

What else was there to say?

He remained motionless for a few moments, then gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, and breathed in the fragrance of the azure blossom.

Darkness embraced him softly.

When Sunny opened his eyes again, he was back in Aletheia's Tower.

His hands were empty. The beautiful blossom was gone, erased with the rest of Wind Flower's dream.

Chapter-1470: Farewell Gift

After returning from Wind Flower's dream, Sunny did not linger for a long time before completing his grim task. Every minute he wasted was one minute more that she had to suffer resisting the inevitable spread of Corruption…

And so, with a heavy heart, he delivered the fatal strike to the beautiful Saint, as swift and merciful as he could make it. Then, Sunny used the divine flames of the Cruel Sight to ignite her body and stepped back, watching as fire spread across the wooden bed and devoured the silk canopy.

The floating lanterns that had illuminated the chamber dissolved into a rain of white sparks, drowning it in darkness. Standing at the edge between the darkness and the stark glow of the burial pyre, Sunny sighed and sat down on the stone floor.

He watched the fire dance in silence, his expression bleak.

It was then that the Spell finally whispered into his ear:

[You have slain a Transcendent human, Wind Flower of the Twilight Sea.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

It paused for a moment, and then added:

[...You have received a Memory.]

Sunny looked down, not even reacting to the last proclamation.

'Ah…'

He had not known Wind Flower for long. In fact, they had only spoken twice. And yet, a deep and heavy sorrow weighed on his

heart.

Wasn't her fate just too bitter, unfair, and sad?

To be the last remnant of a destroyed world, and outlive everything that you ever knew or loved...

He hated it.

But at the same time, perhaps to her, death was a solace.

Closing his eyes, Sunny felt the heat of the blazing flame and remained motionless for a while.

Eventually, he whispered:

"Your nightmare is over."

It was.

But at the same time, it was not.

This Nightmare would not be over until Sunny fulfilled his promise and ended it.

As a dark grimace contorted his face, he gritted his teeth and dove into the Soul Sea.

There, the five black suns hung above the still expanse of dark water, just like always. The legion of silent shadows stood motionlessly in the darkness, just like always. The lightless sea of his soul was quiet and tranquil, just like always.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then walked along the rows of motionless shadows. Past the lumbering shape of the Mountain King, past the formless shadow of the loathsome Thieving Bird's spawn, past the gargantuan figure of the Fallen Titan Goliath…

And so many more, Nightmare Creatures and humans alike.

Eventually, he stopped near the shadow of a tall and imposing man with sharp, fierce features, who wore an archaic robe that seemed

both simple and regal.

He was Daeron of the Twilight Sea, the Serpent King.

...The shadow of Wind Flower was standing near him, as beautiful as she had been in the dream, but now motionless and lifeless… just like the rest of the shadows. The father and daughter were reunited in the tranquil darkness of Sunny's soul.

Sunny thought that seeing them together would sooth his heart, perhaps. But it did not. He still felt bitter and despondent.

Not wishing to look anymore, he turned away and gritted his teeth.

"Curse it. Curse it all…"

Curse the daemons and the gods, curse their damned war, and curse the Nightmare Spell that devoured the few realms that had been left intact in its wake.

Curse Weaver, the Demon of Fate, Firstborn of the Unknown.

Shaking his head, he took a few breaths, and then summoned the runes.

There was a new string of them at the end of the list of his Memories. Concentrating, Sunny read its description:

Memory: [Dream Flower].

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

Memory Tier: I.

He paused for a moment, then summoned the Memory down. Soon, a beautiful azure flower appeared in the darkness in front of him, its petals still covered by dew. It was exactly the same as it had been when presented to him in the dream.

Sunny sighed.

So… the gift Wind Flower had given him was not a simple memento.

He should have known.

Feeling a pulse of sharp pain in his heart, he turned back to the runes and read:

Memory Description: [The dreams and hopes of Wind Flower of the Twilight Sea are contained within this blossom. It was a farewell gift to her killer, Lost from Light.]

Memory Enchantment: [Given Promise].

Enchantment Description: [Crush my hopes, crush my dreams. Crush my nightmares.]

The description was short, poignant, and senseless.

Sunny stared at the runes for a long while, his face motionless. Then, he dismissed them and looked at the beautiful azure flower that hovered in the silent darkness in front of him.

He had no idea what the purpose of this Memory was, nor did he know how Wind Flower had ensured that he would receive it from the Spell.

If there was one thing he knew, however, it was that this gift embodied her last will.

It was the embodiment of her most precious, most ardent desire.

With a sigh, Sunny reached forward, grasped the lotus flower in his hand…

And crushed it.

The azure petals broke and dissolved into blinding light, illuminating the vast darkness of his soul. The pure light reflected in the still waters… drowning in them…

Sunny suddenly felt that something was wrong.

'What…'

Before he could finish the thought, the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear, its voice insidious and quiet:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

And then, he felt a flood of shadow fragments entered his soul, containing enough of them to drown it.

His eyes widened.

'Wait, wait…'

Thrown off balance by the sudden influx of shadow fragments, he couldn't even summon the runes. All he knew was that there were much more fragments pouring into his soul than killing a Transcendent human could have given him. There were more of them than even a normal Awakened would have received, let alone someone like Sunny.

Most soul fragments were lost when one Awakened killed another, after all. Although the killer received a fair share, most of it was wasted.

But not now...

It was as if Wind Flower's entire soul had been contained within the azure flower, and was now being used as fuel to empower his own.

'Wait! At this rate...'

Sunny hurriedly dove out of the Soul Sea and opened his eyes, staring at the blazing pyre in front of him. The fire was still burning, the body of the beautiful Saint turned to ash.

Taking a panicked breath, Sunny jumped away.

It was then that he felt it…

The familiar sensation of his soul shuddering in harrowing pain.

At the same time, the Spell whispered again:

[Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

[Your shadow is taking shape…]

Sunny let out a muffled groan and fell to his knees.

Deep in the darkness of his soul, a new Shadow Core was being born.

Chapter-1471: Terror

[Your shadow is complete.]

Sunny let out a hoarse sigh and uttered a stifled curse. He was standing on one knee, pressing his fist against the stone floor of the tower. His face was pale as that of a ghost, contorted in a pained grimace.

The terrifying agony of having a new Shadow Core form in the depths of his souls was slowly subsiding.

He had risen to a new Class.

This was not the first time Sunny had gone through the familiar torment, but the sudden torrent of shadow fragments caught him entirely by surprise. He did not pass out from the pain, or even fall down… but it was far from pleasant.

'Gods… what happened?'

Standing up with a groan, he swayed slightly and summoned the runes.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Terror.

Shadow Fragments: [7/6000].

Sunny stared at the shimmering runes silently.

'Terror…'

He inhaled deeply.

It took him a few moments to come to terms with what he was looking at. There was no denying it, indeed — Sunny was a Terror now. A creature of dreadful power, second only to the calamitous Titans.

The elation of having become stronger — much stronger, and just when he desperately needed strength as well — was mixed with pain and confusion.

'How?'

Sunny raised his head and looked at the charred remains of Wind Flower's deathbed. The wooden frame was gone, replaced by a scattering of embers. The stones were covered by soot. The beautiful Saint herself had become ash, erased from existence by his blade and the furious conflagration of divine flames.

A dull ache grasped his heart.

'Her gift…'

The [Dream Flower] had not been a natural Memory… that, Sunny was sure of. He did not know how Wind Flower could have influenced the Spell to make sure that he received it, but she had. The gift she had given him in the dream had become reality, containing the very essence of her Transcendent soul.

But still…

Sunny was unique among the Awakened because of his status as a shadow. Unlike most of his peers, he absorbed shadow fragments directly from those who died by his blade, as opposed to receiving them from soul shards. While there were some advantages to this situation, there were also drawbacks.

For one, killing creatures weaker than him was all but useless to Sunny. He also did not receive a portion of the soul fragments his enemy had accumulated when killing other Awakened.

That portion could be as little as zero if the murdered Awakened was

inexperienced, or surpass a hundred soul fragments if they had fully saturated their core. Of course, the difference in Ranks also played a role.

Sunny assumed that Wind Flower's Transcendent soul core had long been fully saturated. Therefore, if a Master like him killed the beautiful Saint, they would have received twice the amount — at least two hundred soul fragments.

However, he had received more. Much more.

The last time Sunny had checked, he was still more than two thousand shadow fragments away from becoming a Terror. So… he had not just received a portion of Wind Flower's power. He had received all of it, with not a single drop wasted, and then a few hundred fragments on top of it.

She had put all of herself into the [Dream Flower]. She had turned her entire soul into a parting gift, so that he could inherit as much power from her as possible.

She must have even sacrificed whatever Memories still remained in her Soul Sea after the bitter defeat in Verge, just so that Sunny could become a Terror before facing Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast in battle. How had Wind Flower been able to create the beautiful Memory? How had she known so much about him and his Aspect? Sunny had no answers.

Perhaps the Mad Prince had told her…

He stared at the smoldering embers of the incinerated bed for a few moments and sighed.

After a few moments of silence, Sunny whispered:

"Thank you."

Lowering his head, he remained still for a while, and then glanced at his shadows.

There were six of them now, all staring back at him silently.

Gloomy, happy, creepy, haughty, naughty… and the new guy.

The sixth shadow was just like the other five, but also different. At first glance, it seemed the least eccentric of them. The new guy appeared rather normal and laidback… friendly, even.

But, for whatever reason, Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine at the sight of it.

There was something eerie about the new shadow. It was as if its outward normalcy was hiding something — a deep, dark ocean of utter, unhinged, unbridled madness. The friendly demeanor was just a thin, fragile veil obscuring the demented depths of its dire and dangerous lunacy.

Sunny let out a long sigh.

"You… you are absolutely crazy, aren't you?"

The crazy shadow scratched the back of its head, twitched, shrugged, and laughed maniacally. Then, it abruptly returned to being normal and friendly. Only its fingers continued to tremble slightly, as if it was barely holding itself back from exploding into a storm of murderous frenzy.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

'Well. Makes sense, really.'

Did it only seem that way, or was the crazy shadow standing a little closer to him than it had a moment ago?

He shook his head.

"Great. Back to your posts, then. Keep observing the forest… oh, and Gloomy. Show the new guy the ropes."

He was certain that the happy, haughty, and naughty shadows would not be able to handle their unhinged younger sibling. The creepy guy, meanwhile… why, Sunny could just see him becoming the crazy newcomer's admiring minion.

The gloomy shadow, though, would have no problem taming the lunatic. Gloomy was the true terror among his helpers… after spending one day with the original shadow, the new guy would not dare to create trouble.

Sunny almost felt pity for the sixth shadow.

...Said terror, meanwhile, glowered at him for a few moments, then shook its head contemptuously and beckoned the crazy guy to follow.

Soon, the shadows disappeared, leaving him alone.

Sunny lingered for a while, then took a few steps back and sat on the floor. Leaning his back against the wall, he looked at the smoldering embers with a hollow expression.

It was already a new day… the first new day Aletheia's Island had seen in countless years. Somewhere outside the walls of the tall tower, the dreadful prisoners of the island were busy slaughtering each other.

Soon, Sunny's companions would wake up. And then…

Then, the last act of this vicious play would begin.

Chapter-1472: Given Promise

Outside Aletheia's Tower, the island was still the same.

And yet, it was entirely new.

The mist still flowed between the ancient pines, and the frozen Nightmare Creatures were still standing on the white stone bridge. But it was a new day. Sunny could already observe subtle changes.

The fog was growing thinner. Devouring Beast, who should have been in the vicinity of the tower at that time, was nowhere to be seen. He did not dare send his shadows out to scout, but he knew that the bestial giantess was now somewhere else on the island, hunting different prey than usual.

Undying Slaughter was somewhere there, as well.

For a moment, Sunny wanted to release the Fragment of the Shadow Realm. The not knowing of it all was gnawing at him. But in the end, he held himself back.

Nothing was going to change if he knew every minute detail of what was happening to the two Defiled Saints. The only thing that mattered was the end result — whether the Plagues were going to prevail against the prisoners of Aletheia's Island or not. And that question was not going to be answered any time soon.

So, Sunny was left alone with his dark thoughts… for a short while.

Then, he heard the sound of footsteps and saw Nephis climbing the steps. She entered the bedchamber and froze for a moment, looking around with her usual indifferent composure. Her gaze lingered at the soot covering the walls, and then settled on Sunny.

He looked up from where he was sitting on the floor and met it

silently.

Nephis lingered for a moment.

"I wanted to congratulate you on becoming a Terror. But… you don't seem to be very excited."

Sunny looked away and shrugged, not knowing what to say. Was he supposed to express his indignation at Wind Flower's inevitable death? That would be… a bit childish. She was not the first person he had met who deserved a less bitter end, and would certainly not be the last.

Saying such things to Nephis, who had lost and buried her own share of precious people, seemed especially cruel.

With a sigh, Neph walked over and sat down near him. She hesitated for a bit, then gently put her arm around his shoulder.

"Did you fulfill your promise to the sleeping Saint?"

Soothed by the familiar steadiness of her even voice and the warmth of her embrace, he nodded.

"Yeah. She wanted me to burn her body, so… well, you can see."

After a while, a heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"It is a bit strange, don't you think? The Nightmares are supposed to be trials of strength for us, the challengers. But what I remember the most is the strength of the illusory people who lived, struggled, and died in these conjured worlds. Noctis, Ananke, Wind Flower… somehow, the passion with which they lived seems much more real than even ours."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then said slowly:

"I don't think it's strange at all. I remember those whom I met in the Nightmares, as well."

She paused before adding, her voice a little lower than before:

"Even though sometimes, I wish to forget."

Sunny smiled bitterly.

Wouldn't it be nice, to forget some things? He was thinking about how nice it would be to forget all the agony he had experienced on Aletheia's Island just recently. It had only been a few months of torment… and yet, he was almost driven mad.

If the loop continued for another month… a year… a few years…

Maybe Sunny would have indeed grown to resemble that bastard, the Mad Prince.

Shaking his head, he looked at the soot and embers left in the wake of Wind Flower's deathbed and fell silent.

After a while, leaning slightly on Nephis, Sunny asked:

"You once told me something. That people like us are born to destroy things, not save them. Do you really believe that?"

She did not answer immediately. Eventually, though, Nephis nodded.

"Yes. Maybe. You and I, Sunny… we were born in a time of war, disaster, and ruin. In a world that is being killed by a flood of invaders. Such a world doesn't need saviors and builders... their time will come after killers and destroyers like us do our part.

If we don't, there will be no world to save, and no homes to rebuild."

A pale smile appeared on her beautiful face.

"So, yes… I believe it. But I also believe that it's not something bad. It's a blessing, in fact."

Sunny remained silent. What a dire blessing it was… well, what else had he expected to hear? She was the Star of Ruin, after all. The last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan, the inheritor of the fire.

He sighed.

"I promised Wind Flower to conquer this Nightmare, you know?"

A dark grin appeared on his face.

"That's the second time I promised to conquer it."

Nephis stood up and looked at him, then smiled from the corner of her mouth.

"Well, then… we'd better really conquer it. You wouldn't want to become a liar, would you?"

Suny chuckled and rose, as well, the memory of her warmth still lingering on his skin.

"Of course not. I am the most honest person in the world, after all. Two worlds, even."

With that, they left the scorched bedchamber and descended to the first floor of Aletheia's Tower, where the rest of the cohort was preparing for the coming day.

Cassie had gone to study the runes in the basement, Effie was busy roasting the Great Tyrant's meat on coals. Jet had dismissed her damaged armor and was sitting on top of the Covetous Coffer, lazily mending a piece of leather clothing.

Noticing the two of them, she looked up and smiled.

"Hey. What's the plan for today?"

Sunny tried not to stare where he was not supposed to stare and coughed.

"Nothing much. Rest, recuperate. Gather our strength."

He paused for a moment and then added, his voice grim:

"We are going to need as much strength as we can muster to defeat your evil twins, starved or not."

Chapter-1473: Hiding in the Tower

Days passed in a strange mix of idleness and tension. Aletheia's Island had always been like a misty hell, but now, that hell was boiling — even secreted away inside the tower, the members of the cohort could feel the echoes of the harrowing clashes between the abominable Nightmare Creatures.

These fiends had been caught by the island across many centuries, but now that the loop was destroyed, they were eradicating each other with terrifying speed.

Of course, Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast were at the forefront of the massacre.

Sunny caught glimpses of the two from time to time. His shadows were always keeping an eye on the outside world. With the mist growing thinner with each day, the landscape of Aletheia's Island gradually cleared — so, by now, he could see a good chunk of the ancient forest from the top of the tower.

The lumbering shape of the bestial giantess was easily noticed. Undying Slaughter was much harder to spot, but he could clearly see the death throes of her victims. For now, nothing seemed to be able to prevail against the two Defiled Saints… to his disappointment.

He would have preferred to see the two Plagues killed by the powerful Nightmare Creatures residing on the island. If they perished, there would be no need for the cohort to stay. Sunny and his companions would be able to return to the Chain Breaker and slip away into the darkness at the heart of the vortex.

But, of course, reality was not that convenient.

Speaking of his companions, each of them was recuperating in their own manner. Nephis was replenishing her soul essence with stunning speed, and spent most of her time training. Her singular devotion to her sword seemed almost obsessive, by now.

Cassie had disappeared into the spherical chamber of Aletheia's Tower, where she was supposed to be studying the runes. And she did do that, of course… but, somehow, Sunny felt that the blind girl mostly went there to be alone. That was why she only returned above ground to eat meals prepared by Nephis and sleep. Most of the time, it was easy to forget that she was even with them.

Effie and Jet were perhaps the most tired of them all. They had experienced months of battling dangerous Nightmare Creatures across the Great River, the tragic destruction of their nomadic tribe, the escape from the swarm of the Drowned, and the horrors of Aletheia's Island without ever having a moment to catch their breaths.

So, these days of hiding inside the tower were the first real opportunity to rest they had received since entering the Nightmare.

The two women mostly relaxed and remained idle. Sunny spent some time with Effie, describing his own experiences in the Tomb of Ariel and sharing valuable knowledge. Jet also listened, sometimes offering her opinion or asking questions… but mostly, she just looked deeply and comfortably asleep.

Sunny was baffled about how someone could sleep so much, but after remembering how overworked Soul Reaper had usually looked since the first day they met, he just figured that she was catching up on nap time after a decade of being worked to the bone by the government.

It really said a lot that she could only get enough sleep… inside a Nightmare.

Jet was consuming the fruits of the sacred tree to replenish her dwindling essence. For now, it looked like there were enough of the succulent golden fruits to last her a long while… she even shared a couple with Effie, partially because the huntress was drooling a lot

when Soul Reaper ate, and partially because, according to Jet, "it could be good for the baby".

Sunny wasn't sure what she meant, but he wasn't going to complain.

As for himself… he had tried to stay idle for the first day, but quickly grew bored with doing nothing. Or rather, the memories of his gruesome death were too vivid when Sunny was not doing anything, so he quickly found something to do.

Of course, that something was weaving. Now that Sunny had five Supreme soul shards to spare, he could start thinking about how to empower the cohort best. He had a few ideas, but was not confident yet. He needed some practice first.

In order to test his theories, Sunny made a few simple alterations to his weaker Memories. For example, he managed to transplant the [Blessing of Spirit] — the enchantment enhancing recovery from mental fatigue — from the Shroud of Dusk to the Puppeteer's Shroud.

He did not even have to add an additional nexus to his first Memory armor, because it already possessed five, but only two relatively light enchantments. Additionally, the [Blessing of Spirit] suited the original Shroud well, considering that its [Doubtless] enchantment also had to do with protecting the mind.

In the same manner, he transplanted the [Blessing of Flesh] — the enchantment that enhanced recovery from physical fatigue — to the Endless Spring. Now, not only could the beautiful glass bottle provide a near-infinite supply of water, but drinking that water was also especially invigorating.

Sunny also made another attempt to master the [Unseen] enchantment of the Moonlight Shard. That single enchantment, which allowed the ghostly stiletto to be summoned instantly, could qualitatively change every Memory in his arsenal. Sadly, it remained unattainable and elusive. He often felt that he was almost there… but at the last moment, the weave always slipped from his fingers.

These were all minor projects, though. His true desire, the white whale Sunny continued to pursue… had little to do with Memories.

Instead, it had to do with Echoes. He had already studied Cassie's blade mannequin before, but now, he also asked her to lend him the Quiet Dancer. By comparing the two Echoes — one created by the enchanters of Clan Valor, the other by the Spell — Sunny was able to learn many new things and come to several tentative conclusions.

He felt that creating an Echo was still far beyond him, or at least too time-consuming to try. However… Sunny came up with a crazy idea.

What if, instead of creating an Echo, he could convert a Memory into one? The Quiet Dancer was already similar to a sentient weapon. Sunny did not know how to weave a semblance of sentience. He did not know how to even approach learning something like that, either.

But he also did not need to.

Anyone else would, but he already had something to substitute artificial sentience with… the true sentience of the silent shadows dwelling within the darkness of his soul.

If he could change the weave of a Memory to that of an Echo… even if the resulting Echo lacked the most important quality — the false spark of life to animate it — his Aspect could theoretically allow him to convert the defective Echo into a perfectly fine Shadow, given that the original Memory and the dark spirit shared the same source and were thus compatible.

Or at least, that was his theory. Truly, Sunny had no idea what kind of a monster such an experiment would create.

Nevertheless, he set his eyes on the Covetous Coffer, which already possessed a few qualities necessary for an Echo, and shared some qualities with the Quiet Dancer, as well. The shadow of the Mordant Mimic was there, in Sunny's soul, so he decided to make it his test subject.

He was only starting to consider how to go about making the Coffer into a partial Echo, though, when something unexpected happened.

As he was coaxing the temperamental rapier into staying still and letting him study her weave…

The entire tower suddenly shook.

Chapter-1474: End of Days

'What the hell?'

Instantly tense, Sunny looked away from the Quiet Dancer and outstretched his hand, ready to summon the Sin of Solace.

His first thought was to Shadow Step into the hidden chamber below the floor of the tower. The tower was shaking, and Cassie was there, at the heart of Aletheia's sorcery. Cassie had also been rather mysterious lately… unpredictable…

However, a moment later, he shook his head, feeling slightly ashamed. Why was he suspecting the blind girl? It was his first reaction, even.

Instead, Sunny concentrated on his shadows and took a closer look outside. What he saw made his expression darken.

"What is happening?"

Jet had woken up from her nap and was now looking at him, a deep scowl on her face. Effie had almost lost her balance when the tower shook, and was now holding her belly, alert. Nephis had jumped down from where she had been carving more meat from the corpse of the Great Tyrant, white sparks igniting in her striking grey eyes.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

Outside the tower… the ancient pines were swaying. Which meant that it was not just Aletheia's Tower that had shaken. It was the entire island.

'Damnation.'

Sunny noticed Cassie appearing from the stairs to the hidden

chamber and answered:

"I'm not sure. But… I think something happened in the port."

Apart from the deadly circle of black obelisks, there was only one place built by Aletheia they had never visited on the island — the port, which was enveloped by green vines and turned into a nest by an especially dreadful Nightmare Creature.

The ancient building was not included in the plan Sunny and Cassie had made, because there was nothing they needed there. In truth, the port had nothing to do with the time loop, the protective enchantments of the tower, or their way to freedom.

It did serve an important role, though. It was there that the mechanism keeping Aletheia's Island in the air was located.

So, unless Sunny wanted to drop the entire island into the vortex, there was no need to fight the current master of the port and enter there.

But he had never thought that the mechanism would be damaged in the extinction war between the prisoners of the island. It had remained intact for countless centuries and was never damaged in any of the revolutions. What kind of terrible might would an abomination have to possess to breach the impregnable defenses of the ancient enchantment?

…One particular horror came to mind.

'The Devouring Beast… it had to be her.'

For a few moments, Sunny was filled with cold terror.

However, noticing that the island was not plummeting into the dark abyss, he calmed down a little.

"I… I don't think that the damage dealt to the levitation mechanism is serious. It was probably just shaken a little."

Just then, the tower trembled again. This time, the tremor was not as powerful, but they still felt it.

Neph's expression grew bleak.

"Still… it's not good news for us."

The island was not falling yet, but who was to say that it would not in the future?

Sunny sighed.

"Yeah. We should probably accelerate our plans."

The members of the cohort looked at each other.

The meaning of his words was simple. Sunny was telling them that the inevitable battle with the Plagues, which they had all been dreading and preparing for during this short period of peace, was now almost upon them.

Cassie sighed.

"I feel like we have at least a couple more days. Staying on the island for longer… might be dangerous."

Sunny nodded.

"Then we'll make our move in two days. For better or worse."

He had already told his companions all he knew about the two Defiled Saints. They had already discussed every possible strategy. Now, all they had to do was prepare themselves mentally and venture out into the mist one last time.

Jet sighed and walked over to the Covetous Coffer.

"I better stop saving those fruits, then."

She was right. Before, they thought that they would try to stay in the tower for as long as possible. Now, however, there was a clear limit to how much time they had. She still had a few of the golden fruits to spare, so absorbing as much essence as possible in preparation for the fight was more important than buying time.

Soon, everyone got busy making their final preparations. Sunny, meanwhile, continued to monitor the outside.

The island quaked several more times in the next two days. The mist, too, grew very thin, allowing him to see far and wide.

And what Sunny saw…

Was truly stunning.

Now that Aletheia's Island had almost lost the obscuring veil of mist, it resembled a ravaged battlefield.

The forest of the ancient pines was almost completely gone. Most of the trees had been shattered or toppled, carpeting the ground like brambles. Here and there, gargantuan corpses lay, surrounded by vast pools of blood. Some of them were terribly torn apart and partially devoured, others were eerily intact.

The few landmarks he remembered were either erased or misshapen and unrecognizable. Not too far away, a single broken wing of the Hollow Butterfly lay on the ground, but the rest of the Great Monster was nowhere to be seen.

It seemed that he had underestimated the primal fury of the Nightmare Creatures imprisoned on the island. By now, there were only a handful of them — the most dreadful and powerful — left.

Sunny saw several chilling scenes, as well. The most terrible of them happened at the dawn of the second day, when the towering shape of Devouring Beast appeared from afar.

The bestial giantess was moving slowly. Then, however, she suddenly froze and looked up.

Countless tendrils descended from the cloudy sky, assaulting her like a tide. Each of them was hundreds of meters long and tremendously powerful — enough so to send shivers running down Sunny's spine.

Devouring Beast swatted away several of the tendrils, but several more wrapped around her arms, her waist, and her neck, both strangling the Defiled Saint and trying to lift her off the ground.

Sunny even felt a sliver of hope that she would be killed by the dreadful horror of the sky, the Harvester.

A frenzied howl shook the world.

Grinning madly, the bestial giantess sank her teeth into one of the tendrils, then strained her muscles and grabbed those that were entangling her arms. Bending at the waist, she growled… and pulled the creature hiding in the clouds down. The ground under her feet exploded, turning into a deep crater.

As Sunny watched in shock, a revolting creature descended from the sky, forcefully thrown down. It was unlike anything he had ever seen… a mass of wriggling flesh that looked like a tattered sail from afar, or a dark star that emanated fleshy tentacles instead of rays of light.

Dozens more tendrils shot toward Devouring Beast, but before they could trap her, the giantess suddenly crouched, and then jumped.

Soaring hundreds of meters into the air, she tore into the Harvester with her fingers, and then plummeted down while grasping it in her hands.

Not long after that, the horror of the skies was completely savaged, its tendrils torn and devoured, its grotesque body mutilated beyond recognition.

The Defiled Saint received many terrible wounds… but her enemy was entirely destroyed.

Less than a dozen minutes later, the Harvester was no more.

…Hidden inside the tower, Sunny trembled. His heart felt heavy.

Letting out a quiet sigh, he closed his eyes and whispered:

"That thing… does not seem hungry at all."

Chapter-1475: Defiled Saints

By the end of the day, Aletheia's Island had grown silent. It was still shaking from time to time, the quakes growing stronger each time… which meant that the sorcery keeping the island afloat was slowly coming undone.

But its surface had become strangely peaceful.

Sunny was pretty sure that, apart from the motionless Nightmare Creatures on the stone bridge, there were only two abominations left on the entire island — Devouring Beast and Undying Slaughter.

The former was messily consuming the remains of the dreadful fiends in the obliterated forest. Deep wounds were covering her towering body, but the bestial giantess did not seem affected by her Flaw, yet.

The latter had just broken free from the circle of black obelisks, shattering most of them in the process. Whatever horror had dwelled within the circle was now dead, while Undying Slaughter… she, at least, appeared to be running low on essence.

Sunny could not see much from his observation post at the top of the tower, and he did not even dare to look at the Defiled Saints directly, afraid that they would sense his gaze. But he could tell that battling the being that had been imprisoned by the black obelisks took a lot out of the hateful mist wraith.

Undying Slaughter had a more cruel Flaw than the bestial giantess. Not only was her essence constantly being drained, but she also had to spend it while fighting powerful opponents. As a result, her entire existence was a perilous balancing act.

And right now, the mist wraith was out of balance.

Sunny watched as she prowled the island, searching for new victims.

She even approached the tower and spent some time observing the Nightmare Creatures on the bridge. In the end, however, Undying Slaughter backed away and disappeared into the mist.

'She's running out of time.'

Sunny felt a spark of hope ignite in his heart. Come dawn, the cohort was going to leave the tower and face the Defiled Saints in battle. The weaker their enemies would become, the better their chances of survival were going to be.

Still… he did not feel confident. If anything, Sunny felt that they would be marching to their deaths.

'Maybe we should rethink our plans and try to escape stealthily, instead.'

There was still a little bit of time left. He would try to talk some sense into Nephis in the morning.

Sunny continued to monitor the island until dawn, dreading the next day.

He… could imagine killing one of the Defiled Saints. With him and Nephis working together, both being Terrors, with Jet's lethal Aspect, Cassie and Effie supporting them from the back, Saint and Fiend holding the vanguard positions, and Nightmare affecting the enemy with his insidious powers, there was a chance.

Most importantly, he possessed the most precious advantage — detailed knowledge of what the two Plagues were capable of and experience fighting them.

However, Sunny could not imagine surviving a battle against both abominable fiends at the same time, no matter how drained and heavily wounded they were.

…At the very brink of dawn, when he was wondering if there was a way to separate them for a sufficiently long period of time, there was suddenly movement in the shattered forest.

Sunny was distracted from his heavy thoughts and peered into the

distance through one of his shadows.

'What is she doing…'

Out there in the mist, Devouring Beast suddenly froze and let go of the horribly mutilated corpse of a Nightmare Creature she had been chewing. The ghastly carcass fell down, sending a cloud of dust and splinters into the air.

With blood streaming down her face, the colossal giantess looked down coldly.

It was only then that Sunny noticed another figure standing some distance away from her, this one much smaller. Undying Slaughter was obscured by the mist, but now that it had become much thinner, the wraith was easier to spot.

Not that she was hiding. On the contrary, it was as though she wanted to be noticed.

Undying Slaughter did not look that well. Her elusive figure seemed even less substantial than usual, as if on the verge of dissipating into a wisp of fog.

The two Defiled Saints stared at each other silently for a while. Sunny did not know if they were capable of communicating with each other, or if they needed to. From what he could tell, there was an unspoken understanding between these harrowing abominations.

Eventually, Devouring Beast grinned wickedly, revealing her bloodied teeth.

'They… they are going to…'

His eyes widened slightly.

At the same time, a ghostly blade appeared in Undying Slaughter's hand, and she moved forward.

It seemed there was no loyalty among the Defiled.

The battle against the prisoners of Aletheia's Island should have been

like a feast for Undying Slaughter… but those harrowing abominations had not been weak. In fact, most of them had been superior to the mist wraith both in terms of Class and Rank. So, she had ended up burning more essence than she received by killing them.

Which was why she needed to absorb more. And the only creature she could kill, by now, was the other Defiled Saint. Devouring Beast.

The two Plagues were going to clash with each other, and, as if answering their fury, the whole island shuddered. This time, the tremor was violent enough to throw Sunny down to the stone floor.

'This is our chance!'

The other members of the cohort had been checking their equipment, almost ready to leave the tower. However, Sunny saw an opportunity, so he turned to them and shouted:

"We need to go, now!"

It was going to take some time to get to where Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast were fighting. By then, one of the Plagues would already be dead… and there was not going to be a better moment to attack the remaining one than immediately after the battle was over.

Not unless they wanted to risk staying on the island until it collapsed into the vortex, at least.

The members of the cohort looked at Sunny, then exploded with motion. A few moments later, they were already passing through the gateway of Aletheia's Tower.

Out there in the distance, the Defiled Saints collided. Devouring Beast's towering figure shimmered, and then suddenly disappeared.

Instead of a dreadful giantess, a savage-looking woman appeared amidst the toppled trees, her skin painted by dirt and blood… she must have realized that her size would only be a disadvantage when fighting the mist wraith, and so transformed back into the semblance of a human.

Her human form, however, possessed astonishing strength, explosive speed, and ferocious might. Even Undying Slaughter seemed to tremble in front of Devouring Beast's primal fury.

However, Effie's evil twin did not possess means of attacking intangible beings. Nevertheless, she was more than capable of dodging and evading the wraith's attacks… and remaining in the form of an apparition was costing Undying Slaughter essence.

In the end, the mist wraith had no choice but to abandon her ghostly form and face her sister as a creature of flesh, blood, and bone.

That was the last thing Sunny saw before commanding his shadow to abandon its crow's nest on the top floor of the tower and race to catch up to the cohort. He could not allow himself to leave any of his helpers behind — in the upcoming battle, he was going to need every drop of his strength.

"You know what to do!"

As the cohort was climbing down the narrow steps, Sunny jumped into Nightmare's saddle, commanded his shadows to augment the black stallion, and rushed forward on his own. For a moment, it felt as if they were falling… but then, his steed landed at the base of the cliff, took a sharp turn, and avoided the stone bridge by leaping over the moat.

Landing on the other side of the wide chasm, Nightmare flew in the direction where the two Defiled Saints were fighting.

The wind whistled in Sunny's ears.

And then, just as he was about to reach the vicinity of the dreadful clash…

The island quaked once more, and a terrible wail assaulted his ears.

Diving out of the mist, Sunny ordered Nightmare to stop and looked forward with wide eyes, his face turning white as a sheet of paper.

Out there in front of him, surrounded by signs of terrible destruction…

A tall, bestial woman was laying on the ground, her face covered by blood. Her whole body was trembling. Sunny thought that Devouring Beast was afraid, but then, he heard a strange, chilling sound.

…She was laughing.

A ghastly, mad laughter escaped from between her bloodied teeth, full of wicked glee.

It only grew quiet when Undying Slaughter, who was standing above the savage woman with a cold expression on her dreadfully beautiful face, ruthlessly plunged her ghostly blade into her sister's chest.

Devouring Beast, Heralds of the Estuary, one of the six Defiled champions of Verge… died just like that, slain to satiate another Plague's hunger.

'...They are the Five Plagues now, I guess.'

For a moment, Sunny was frozen in place, struggling to believe his luck.

Then, Undying Slaughter retracted her blade, turned slightly…

And looked directly at him.

There was doom and inevitability in her emotionless, inhuman, piercing blue eyes.

He was suddenly very, very cold. The memory of that first harrowing death on Aletheia's Island resurfaced in his mind, making Sunny shudder violently.

'Not this time, wretch.'

Struggling against the instinctual terror, he met Undying Slaughter's chilling gaze...

And smiled.

Chapter-1476: Attrition

Sunny felt that they had gotten incredibly lucky.

There was always a chance that Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast would turn on each other, but he had not dared to rely on that possibility. But now, one of the Plagues was dead.

That said, the situation was not ideal. Sunny would have preferred if it was Undying Slaughter that had perished… the best possible outcome, however, would have been if he had arrived just before their battle ended and stole the kill from the mist wraith.

Then, not only would one of the Defiled Saints have died, but the other would have also been deprived of absorbing her essence. Killing Undying Slaughter then would have been much easier.

But although their luck was good, it was not that good.

As things stood now, Undying Slaughter had just replenished her dwindling essence. Sunny did not know how much of it she had gotten, exactly, but it had to be a substantial amount. Devouring Beast had been a mighty abomination, after all… her corrupted soul had to have been extremely potent.

So, while the mist wraith was not in her peak state, she was also more than powerful enough to eliminate the cohort now.

'That's alright.'

They had planned for such an eventuality, as well.

Sunny had fought with Undying Slaughter many times. He had done so alone, supported by his Shadows, and even with the help of the other members of the cohort… he had died in agony each time.

For that reason, their goal today was not to be to overpower and slay the dreadful wraith. She was too powerful for them to prevail against her in a battle… which did not mean that they could not win.

Instead of trying to defeat Undying Slaughter, what they needed to do was tie her down in a prolonged confrontation. It was just how Sunny had imagined killing someone like Jet — the key to doing so was to force her to exhaust her essence while not giving her a chance to replenish it.

Which was why this battle of theirs was going to be a battle of attrition.

…Still smiling, Sunny mockingly saluted Undying Slaughter with the Sin of Solace, and then gave Nightmare a mental command to flee.

The dark destrier turned and shot back the way they had come, splinters and bits of soil flying from under his adamantine hooves. Of course, the mist wraith was not going to let a source of essence escape that easily… almost at the same moment, she lunged forward in pursuit.

Nightmare was incredibly fast — in fact, Sunny doubted that there were many creatures of the same Rank faster than his tenebrous steed. However, to his horror, Undying Slaughter was not much slower. Even though the dark destrier was augmented by the shadows, the distance between him and the mist wraith was remaining the same. It was even dwindling slowly.

'...Just what kind of monster is she?'

Sunny was not too disheartened, though. After all, he did not really want to escape from Undying Slaughter. Instead, he wanted to lure her into the trap that the cohort had prepared.

Soon, he was almost back to the tower. The dreadful enemy was right on his heels.

'It's now or never…'

Before Undying Slaughter could attack, Sunny dismissed Nightmare and fell to the ground. Instead of hitting it, however, he simply

dissolved into the shadows and stepped out of them on the other side of the moat, rolling down the stone steps for a moment until Nephis caught him.

The cohort was currently in front of the entrance to the stone bridge. Or rather, Nephis, Jet, Saint, and Fiend were there with Sunny…

Cassie and Effie were much higher up the cliff, standing on the stone steps far above them.

Effie's spear was already flying down.

Nephis was helping Sunny stand up when the spear hit the slope of the cliff with the force of a tactical missile. The whole cliff shuddered, sending him tumbling down once again, and a deafening boom spread from the point of impact, accompanied by the cracking noise of breaking stone.

A large part of the slope simply shattered, stone debris flying in the air, and slid down into the dark chasm of the moat. With it, of course, a number of ancient runes that had been carved into the cliff were destroyed.

The enchantment protecting the bridge was broken at that moment.

Out there on the opposite end of the bridge, the Nightmare Creatures that had been frozen before shuddered, released from the invisible trap.

And just as they did…

Undying Slaughter appeared from the mist, her glacial blue eyes burning from dreadful, cold killing intent.

Before she could even react, the former prisoners of the stone bridge lunged at her, overcome by bloodlust and fury. A Corrupted Tyrant, a Corrupted Terror… a Great Beast…

Finally managing to stand up, Sunny leaned on Nephis and looked across the bridge. The released abominations had already clashed with Undying Slaughter, the whole island shaking from the dreadful force of their clash.

Or maybe it was simply quaking because the enchantment keeping it in the air was failing.

He exhaled slowly.

"So far, so good."

If there was anything they could do to drain Undying Slaughter's essence before facing her themselves, they had to do it. Of course, it was a dangerous gamble…

The Nightmare Creatures that had been trapped on the bridge could force the mist wraith to burn through her precious essence, but they could also become her victims, fueling her defiled soul.

In fact, before a single minute passed, one of the abominations already looked like it was close to death…

Just a split second before Undying Slaughter could finish it off, though, a bone javelin suddenly fell from the sky, piercing the Nightmare Creature's neck and impaling it on the ground. The ghostly blade bit into the massive body of the abomination a moment later, easily passing through its armor.

But it was for naught. There was no soul for the mist wraith to destroy, because the creature was already dead. The bone javelin had killed it instantly.

Feeling a dark grin twist his lips, Sunny looked up.

There, high above, Cassie and Effie were still standing on the stone steps. There were a dozen more javelins laying on the ground in front of the vigorous huntress.

These javelins had been made from the ribs of the Great Tyrant. Of course, in normal circumstances, it would have been hard for Effie to slay Nightmare Creature of such dire power with one blow…

But when they were already almost dead from Undying Slaughter's attacks? That was much easier.

As for knowing the exact moment when to attack — after the

abomination had grown weak from its wounds, but before the mist wraith could deliver the fatal blow — Cassie was there to help. With her ability to perceive several seconds into the future, she could tell Effie just when to throw the javelins, and who to aim for.

Together, they were in a perfect position to achieve a simple, but vitally important task.

Deny Undying Slaughter any essence.

…The two of them were already accomplishing that task splendidly.

Chapter-1477: Undying Slaughter

Sunny knew how terrifying Undying Slaughter was better than most… perhaps even better than anyone. And yet, even he was astonished by the sight of the dreadful mist wraith slaughtering the former prisoners of the stone bridge.

Each of them was an opponent Sunny would not want to face in battle. Some, he had a good chance of defeating, but others were absolutely lethal existences to a Master — even an Ascended Terror like him.

Nevertheless, all of them had been ruthlessly and methodically brought down by the Defiled Saint. It was as if no amount of physical might, impregnable armor, and unholy powers could deter her. The ghostly blade danced in the mist, and following its elusive movements, the souls of the harrowing Nightmare Creatures were snuffed out one after another.

…Or rather, they would have been, if not for Effie and Cassie.

Each time Undying Slaughter was about to kill one of her enemies, a bone javelin would inevitably fall from the sky, stealing the creature's life moments before the mist wraith delivered the last strike. Guided by the blind seer, Effie had not missed once.

Which meant that all the essence the Defiled Saint was spending to fight against the group of powerful abominations could not be replenished by absorbing their broken souls. With each moment, she was growing weaker.

Their plan was working.

The last to fall was a Great Beast that resembled a black hound with

seven serpentine tails. Its lean, muscular body towered above Undying Slaughter like a dark hill, and its power was dreadful enough to make the ground crack and collapse into the chasm of the empty moat.

The abominable hound was like a living nightmare, its frenzied eyes burning with eerie green flames.

Despite it all, neither its terrifying jaws nor its seven tails managed to strike the elusive mist wraith. Moving with the graceless elegance of an emotionless butcher, Undying Slaughter delivered the Great Beast two swift, cruel blows. The hound staggered after the first one, then grew slow and lethargic after the second.

The green flames burning in its eyes dimmed… and before the third blow landed, a bone javelin pierced one of them. The monstrous black hound was thrown down by the force of the impact, making the island shake, and grew still. Viscous red liquid flowed from its maw.

On the slope of the cliff, Effie let out a shaky breath and swayed lightly. Her legs gave out, and if Cassie had not caught her in time, the huntress would have fallen down. The blind girl helped her sit down on the stone steps.

These past few minutes had taken a lot out of Effie. Even though she was far from the terrible battlefield, she had to put all of her immense strength into each throw… especially that last one. Sweat was rolling down her pale face.

"Did I… did I just kill a Great Nightmare Creature?"

Her tired voice was faint and full of disbelief.

Cassie smiled gently.

"You certainly did."

Effie took a deep breath and put her trembling hand on her belly, as if trying to protect it.

"D—damn… I've been spending too much time with doofus, huh?"

Of course, the Great Beast had already been brought to the verge of death by Undying Slaughter. And of course, all members of the cohort had done their part in order to make the outcome possible… and yet, a Great Beast had fallen by Effie's hand. It was a startling achievement, to say the least.

A feat worthy of Raised by Wolves, the legendary huntress of the Dark City.

Effie smiled weakly, lingered for a few moments, and said in a solemn tone:

"Well, f…"

The island quaked, and the sound of breaking stones swallowed her words.

Far below, more stone debris slid into the widening chasm. Even the bridge shuddered slightly, a net of cracks appearing on its surface.

On the far side of the bridge, Undying Slaughter stared at the dead Great Beast for a few moments, then turned and looked across the chasm, at the members of the cohort.

Sunny shivered, feeling an eerie chill.

"Let's go."

They stepped on the bridge at the same moment as the mist wraith did.

There was nothing left for them to do but fight.

'Come, aid me.'

His shadows rose from the ground, flowing onto his body. One, two, three, four, five… the sixth one, however, wrapped itself around Nephis instead. At the same time, a generous measure of her pure flame filled him with radiant warmth. The sum of their powers was greater than the parts.

Sunny felt as strong as a Titan.

He dashed forward, followed by Nephis and Saint. The three of them were going to confront the mist wraith first, and hopefully force her to assume a less ghostly form. Jet, Fiend, and Nightmare would attack second.

"Remember, our weapon is time!"

The blade of the Cruel Sight ignited with divine flame.

They clashed with the dreadful wraith in the middle of the cracking bridge. Undying Slaughter was still stronger, faster, and far more malevolent than Nephis and Sunny… however, with Saint fighting by their side, the two of them were able to keep up.

Far more important was the fact that both Sunny and Nephis were combat prodigies. He could follow Undying Slaughter's movements, and even predict them, because of his mastery of Shadow Dance. She was capable of doing the same because controlling the flow of combat and manipulating the actions of her enemies had always been the basis of her skill.

Now that Neph's combat mastery entered a period of rapid growth, that ability of hers had become even more frightening.

Therefore, both of them could counterbalance Undying Slaughter's undeniable superiority… to a degree.

Still, Sunny felt stifled in this battle.

That was because he was not just fighting against the terrifying mist wraith. He was also fighting against the memories of dying terribly by her hand. The pain of having his soul shattered… the dread of seeing his shadow killed… the sorrow of being helpless to save his companions… all those scars were like chains that weighed his limbs down.

If Sunny wanted to have a chance of surviving this fight, he had to break these chains.

'I'm alive, am I not?!'

He received the ghostly blade on the shaft of the Cruel Sight and was

thrown back, his hands growing numb. Before Undying Slaughter could advance and deliver a follow-up attack, though, Nephis appeared in her way, her sword shining with incandescent radiance, the single gem of the Crown of Dawn burning like a third eye.

Sunny regained his balance and threw himself back into the fight.

'I survived…'

Neph staggered back, but Saint took her place. The graceful knight was wielding her dark sword in both hands, facing the mist wraith with cold indifference. They clashed fiercely, and the stone bridge shuddered.

He was already lunging forward to share the pressure with his Shadow.

'And now, it's time to deliver some payback!'

After all, Sunny was nothing if not vindictive.

He had destroyed the Black Knight of the ruined cathedral for gutting him. He killed the immortal Transcendent, Solvane, for throwing him into the Red Colosseum. He had shattered the Fallen Titan Goliath for bringing him to the very doorstep of death.

Now… what was he going to do to Undying Slaughter for killing him multiple times?

Chapter-1478: Soul Reaper Jet

Weighed down by an instinctual fear, Sunny used an old ally to overcome it… spite. With its help, some of the invisible chains that were holding him back snapped.

But not all of them.

Working together with Nephis and Saint, Sunny managed to stall Undying Slaughter. The three of them surrounded her, but they were in no position to attack. Instead, they were barely managing to stay alive while protecting each other and concentrating on defense.

The mist wraith was slowly pushing them back.

Sunny's spiteful nature was enough to help him overcome the memory of agony and death, but it was not powerful enough to dispel a deeper, far more painful fear. The fear of watching those he cared about die.

The memory of that helplessness, that sorrow, that guilt… was incomparably more dreadful than the memory of having his own life snuffed out. Death was merciful, after all. The dead felt no pain.

So, to struggle free of the remaining chains, Sunny needed to find a more resilient source of strength within his heart. He could not rid himself of the lingering scars delivered to him by Aletheia's Island with just spite.

As he searched for that source, Undying Slaughter moved like mist, suddenly appearing behind Nephis. Her ghostly blade lashed out silently, almost piercing Neph's chest… if the young woman had not dodged at the last moment, one of her soul cores would have been destroyed.

Sunny froze for a moment…

And then exploded with ferocious might.

'Ah. I think I found it.'

Finally, the fear that had been holding him back was vanquished. Sunny had found the strength he needed to free himself of it… and it was an obvious one, at that.

His desire to protect those he cherished was much more powerful than his vindictive desire to avenge himself. It made sense, really… since the fear of losing his companions was stronger than the fear of losing his own life, the resolve that had to do with others would naturally be larger than the resolve that only had to do with himself.

Payback was fine, but protecting the people he loved was a much more powerful source of motivation... incomparably so, really.

Feeling as if a great weight had been removed from his heart, Sunny shook off the lingering trauma of having endured the loop, and threw himself into the battle with boundless determination.

His killing intent soared, not at all inferior to the murderous will of the dreadful wraith.

…And yet, Sunny did not allow that intent to rule him.

Coldly and callously, he reminded himself of what their goal was. It was not to defeat Undying Slaughter in battle… it was to prolong the battle to the point where her Flaw would destroy her without their help, or at least weaken her enough to doom her.

Now that Sunny's mental state was cleansed, he entered the familiar state of combat clarity. His movements turned sharper and more precise. His wildly beating heart calmed down.

'We can do it.'

Killing the mist wraith was, perhaps, out of their reach. But resisting her for a while? That, Sunny and his companions could accomplish.

As Aletheia's Island shuddered and quaked, they continued to fight Undying Slaughter on a crumbling bridge.

Sunny, Nephis, and Saint held out for as long as they could. Eventually, though, even their inexhaustible bodies had grown heavy with fatigue. This was one of the most intense fights Sunny had ever participated in — the perilous battle with Dire Fang seemed mild in comparison to this harrowing clash. Of course, they couldn't keep up with this level of intensity for a long time.

They had done their part, though. The essence that Undying Slaughter had absorbed by killing Devouring Beast was already somewhat exhausted in her battle against the Nightmare Creatures. The three of them had forced the mist wraith to waste even more, draining her reserves. She had already abandoned her ghostly form, facing them as a creature of flesh and bone.

Still, if things continued in that manner, the Defiled Saint would inevitably kill them.

However, Undying Slaughter possessed one fatal weakness.

…She was alone.

And no one survived in the Dream Realm alone.

Just as Sunny was feeling that they were about to die, he shouted hoarsely and withdrew. Nephis and Saint dashed away at the same time.

Jet and Fiend took their place, followed by Nightmare, who rose from the shadows. The retreat and advance were performed seamlessly, not giving the wraith a chance to give chase.

A moment later, Jet's frosty glave collided with Undying Slaughter's ghostly blade. Soul Reaper grinned.

"My back is still itching from the last time we met. Prepare to die… again… you filth!"

Sunny staggered back and leaned on the Cruel Sight, breathing heavily. He did not know how long this respite would last, or even if the island itself would last much longer. All he knew was that he had to be able to rejoin the battle as soon as possible.

By his side, Nephis sheathed her sword, looking at the battle happening in front of them with somber intensity. White flames were dancing in her eyes.

Jet, Fiend, and Nightmare were holding their own against Undying Slaughter… mostly because she was already running extremely low on essence and did not summon her unholy powers much. Her speed and strength also decreased.

But not by a lot.

Sunny gritted his teeth when Fiend was sent flying back by a devastating blow from the ghostly blade. His impenetrable steel carapace held, this time, but the infernal ogre looked rattled and pained by the Defiled Saint's strike.

Nightmare was the most vulnerable of the three, but he was by no means weak. His furious attacks gave Jet the opportunity to advance.

Soul Reaper was the tip of their attack formation.

Jet fought with cold fury, her glaive leaving afterimages in its wake. She met Undying Slaughter blow for blow, refusing to be pushed back. It was as if she had forgotten what hesitation was… in fact, she seemed to be enjoying herself. Her lips were twisted into a dark, murderous grin. Her icy blue eyes were like two lakes of frozen wrath.

The two of them were so alike that, sometimes, it was hard to tell which one was the valiant Master, and which one was the Defiled wraith.

"Wretch… you are such a… disappointment…"

Jet growled those words, and then staggered back.

At the same time, Saint struck her sword against her breastplate twice and lunged forward. Sunny followed.

"Go!"

They had replaced Jet, Fiend, and Nightmare again. This time, there

was a slight delay before the tired fighters retreated and the rested… relatively rested… fighters advanced. However, a bone javelin fell from the sky, forcing the Defiled Saint to slow down for a moment.

Aletheia's Island was convulsing all around them. Large chunks of stone fell from the bottom of the bridge and plummeted into the chasm of the empty moat.

"Die!"

Sunny crossed blades with Undying Slaughter once again.

They fought. They endured. They bought time.

Time was their greatest weapon, after all.

After a while, Sunny felt like he was going to drop dead. They had already advanced and retreated three times, but the mist wraith was still as overbearing and deadly as ever…

Or maybe not quite.

Her strength was decreasing, too. Her essence had to be running dry. Undying Slaughter still maintained an emotionless expression, her chilling blue eyes filling him with a sense of dread… but her behavior had subtly changed.

It was almost as if she was feeling… if not desperate, then at least pressed.

'We just need… to last… a little longer…'

At that moment, the surface of the stone bridge under his feet rippled and tilted. Startled, Sunny lost his balance — only for a split second, but it was enough.

The ghostly blade was already flying at him, inevitable as death itself.

Before it could ravage his soul, however, an incandescent sword appeared in its path.

Nephis had struck from an awkward angle and groaned when her sword clashed with Undying Slaughter's blade. It was violently thrown aside and slipped from her hands, disappearing into the darkness below the bridge. She was pushed back, as well, and fell down.

Saint was a step or two too far to help…

Sunny's eyes widened.

But, strangely enough, the mist wraith did not finish either him or Nephis off. In fact, she seemed to have staggered, as well. This was the first time Undying Slaughter had shown a sign of weakness.

…It was also the last.

Before the mist wraith could regain her balance, a swift figure flew between Nephis and Sunny. He felt a cool wind throw his hair into disarray.

Then, he heard the air whining as it was cut by a sharp blade.

A split second later, Jet's glaive tore through the distance between her and the staggered wraith, plunging into Undying Slaughter's chest.

The two of them froze for a second, two pairs of icy blue eyes staring into each other with indescribable emotion.

The Defiled Saint raised her blade, as if trying to retaliate, but Jet simply twisted her glaive and gripped it tighter.

"You go to hell."

Her voice was as cold as a nameless grave. Jet batted the ghostly blade away, pulled her hand back, and then thrust her weapon into the enemy's soul once again.

Sunny thought that he heard the crystal ring of something breaking.

And then, the chilling light of the Defiled Saint's eyes grew dim.

The wraith swayed slightly… and fell back.

The moment her body touched the stone, it turned into mist and dissipated, disappearing without a trace.

Undying Slaughter was no more.

Chapter-1479: Fractured Island

'She's... dead.'

For a moment, there was silence.

Sunny regained his balance, grunted, and hurried to help Nephis stand up. Saint lowered her sword, acting as indifferent as ever. It was as if they had not just narrowly escaped being slaughtered by a Defiled Saint.

But they had. The Defiled Saint was truly, undeniably gone. Slaughtered, just like she had slaughtered countless living beings.

'Hell...'

Behind them, Fiend and Nightmare were both battered, but relatively unscathed. Both Shadows were watching Jet with piercing intensity.

Soul Reaper herself stood motionlessly above the spot where her future self had perished. Her icy blue eyes were strangely distant. Finally, she let out a long sigh.

"So that's how it is…"

Suddenly, her figure was shrouded in cold mist. That mist flowed along the graceful lines of her supple body, finally forming into a ghostly blade. Then, the shape of that blade changed, elongating until it turned into a beautiful glaive… no, rather, a war scythe. Its dark steel possessed a dreadful sheen to it, with frost patterns decorating the sinister curved blade.

The ghostly scythe seemed to absorb all warmth from the world, emanating a frigid sense of lethal cold.

An amused smile appeared on Jet's face.

Raising an eyebrow, she turned to Sunny and said:

"You… won't believe what the Spell just said. I guess all I had to do was kill myself… to receive my Aspect Legacy…"

'An Aspect Legacy?'

Sunny was momentarily stunned. Jet was a strange existence — a person who was not quite alive, but also not quite dead. So, there was a strange and darkly poetic logic to her Aspect Legacy being locked behind the act of attaining the purest expression of one of these states… namely, dying once again. However, how had killing Undying Slaughter substituted true death?

And what kind of an insane requisite it was, to literally die?!

All Aspect Legacies had unique conditions of being unlocked, but still… wasn't the Spell going too far with this one?

Sunny opened his mouth to say something… but he never got the chance.

Just at that moment, the island shuddered once again, and the damaged bridge they were standing on finally collapsed.

Surrounded by stone debris, the members of the cohort plummeted into the dark chasm.

'Crap!'

The fall from such height was not going to kill an Ascended, but hitting the ground would not be pleasant, either… especially if a few pieces of the bridge decided to fall on their heads immediately after.

He dismissed Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare before calling upon the shadows and manifesting them into resilient chains. Grabbing onto them, the three Masters managed to control their fall and land at the bottom of the empty moat safely.

There, everything was a mess. Effie had shattered a large portion of the cliff's slope earlier, causing countless tons of black rock to slide into the moat. The Great Beast she killed later had also caused a

collapse, sending an avalanche of stones and soil into the chasm.

Neph's incandescent sword was laying on the ground just a few meters away from them, its radiance illuminating the chaotic scene. She walked over and picked it up, then looked around somberly.

"Is everyone alright?"

Jet was the first one to answer. Dismissing the ghostly scythe, she seemed to absorb the torrent of frosty mist it had turned into and nodded.

"I'm fine."

Sunny answered a few moments later:

"Yes… no."

The first word was said in a relaxed tone, while the second was a bit shaky.

Standing at the bottom of the moat, he had glanced down and noticed a wide crack running through the rock surface beneath him. His right foot was on one side of the crack, while his left was on the other.

The fracture seemed to be rather deep… deep… extremely deep…

Staring into the darkness, Sunny realized that the fracture was not just deep. It was, in fact, bottomless. That was because it was not just the bottom of the moat that had cracked… but the bottom of the island, as well.

So, what he was looking at was actually the unfathomable darkness at the heart of the colossal vortex. The fracture pierced Aletheia's Island straight through, leading to the abyss beneath it.

Raising his head, Sunny stared at Nephis and Jet for a moment, then said in a bleak tone:

"I… I think that this whole island is about to fall apart."

He carefully moved his right leg over the crack and let out a small sigh of relief when it safely landed near his left one.

"So, how about we get the hell off before it does?"

He didn't have to ask twice.

However, climbing out of the moat had turned out harder than they anticipated. Just as they approached the wall of the chasm, Aletheia's Island quaked once again, the deafening sound of cracking stone echoing in the empty moat. The fracture Sunny had noticed grew wider, chunks of black rock falling into the darkness below.

At the same time, a rain of stones fell on them from above. Nephis frowned, obliterating an especially heavy boulder with one strike of her incandescent sword. Jet nimbly evaded a few more.

'Curse it…'

The shadow chains shot forward, protecting Sunny and his companions. Looking back, he saw the familiar golden rope appearing in Neph's hands. She threw it to him without having to say anything.

Sunny caught the rope and immediately dove into the shadows, stepping out of them on the crumbled remains of the bridge.

By the time he pulled Nephis and Jet up, Cassie and Effie had already descended from the stone steps. The island was shaking and convulsing around them, with almost no pause between the tremors anymore.

Sunny's expression was dim.

"Let's go. It's time we escape this damned place."

They crossed the moat and entered the former killing field around tower. Now, it was simply the death field — carcasses of dreadful Nightmare Creatures littered the ground, which was soaked with their blood. The long bone javelins Sunny had crafted and Effie had thrown protruded from their flesh, each one as heavy as a bolt meant for an impossible siege engine.

Sunny would have loved to collect the soul shards from the dead abominations, but there was no time. Passing between the corpses, the cohort entered the shattered remains of the ancient pine forest.

All around them, Aletheia's Island was coming undone.

Chapter-1480: In a Day's Work

Without the deadly Nightmare Creatures hiding in the mist and blocking the way, it took them a surprisingly short amount of time to reach the hidden bay. Sunny struggled to believe how much blood he had spilled in the past to traverse the dreadful reaches of Aletheia's Island… now that its prisoners were gone, the island had fallen silent.

Of course, it was hard to recognize the places where Sunny had fought, struggled, and died. The forest was no more, with most of the ancient pines laying on the ground, either toppled or entirely destroyed. The mist was largely gone, too, revealing the scene of startling destruction in all its frightening glory.

Massive carcasses towered above the devastated landscape here and there, some of them partially devoured. Rivers of blood flowed between the toppled trees, turning the remains of the forest into a vile swamp. It was like a scene out of a feverish nightmare…

Well, of course it was. They were in a Nightmare, after all.

As the cohort hurried to reach the Chain Breaker, Aletheia's Island was starting to fall apart. It was shuddering and quaking, making it hard to advance at a steady pace. More cracks appeared in the bloodsoaked soil, some of them leading all the way down to the darkness below. Sometimes, a wide chasm would open right in front of the cohort, forcing them to change course and rush to circle around it.

It felt like they were running out of time.

…But, in the end, they did not.

Sunny was starting to feel rather restless, but just then, the cohort finally reached the stone steps leading down to the white beach. Cassie was riding Nightmare, while Effie was once again being

carried by the Covetous Coffer. Sending the two of them ahead, he joined Nephis and Jet in descending from the cliffs in a much faster way…

They simply jumped off the edge and used their Memories to glide down.

Finally, they saw the Chain Breaker in the distance. The graceful vessel was where they had left it, crashed against a black cliff, its bow buried in the white sand.

"Hurry!"

As they raced across the white beach, the whole island seemed to have tilted. A thunderous sound of something impossibly large breaking rolled from behind them, and Sunny felt his heart skipping a beat.

They reached the Chain Breaker and wasted no time climbing aboard. The dawn had come and gone before the battle with Undying Slaughter, and dusk was still too far away. The timing of their escape was not at all optimal, but they had little choice but to make do. The task of raising the ship into the air once again fell to Nephis.

While Effie and Jet were looking around with stunned expressions — neither of them had seen the Chain Breaker during the last cycle of the time loop, after all — Nephis dashed to the enchantment circle at the stern of the ship. Cassie had disappeared to somewhere under the deck, while Sunny simply stood where he was, looking back at Aletheia's Island.

That cursed place.

The fact that he was finally going to escape this harrowing hell did not feel real. After all the pain, all the suffering, all the deaths… with how elusive time had been inside the loop, the months Sunny spent repeating the same desperate actions over and over again felt like an eternity.

"Who says you can escape?"

The Sin of Solace had appeared from somewhere, unnoticed, and was

now standing behind him.

"Who says that your suffering is over? That your pain is over? Fool… ah, you don't even know how pitiful you are."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Be quiet. At least I'm not as pitiful as you."

Just at the moment, the island quaked once again. In the distance, the black cliffs rising above the beach crumbled and collapsed, falling down like a black avalanche. A giant crack appeared on the ground, the sand spilling into it like water, and crawled in the direction of the Chain Breaker.

Then, the flying ship moved, as well.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, it rose above the ground and soared into the sky. Nephis was guiding it away from the disintegrating beach.

Sunny watched Aletheia's Island break apart in silence.

He had lost so much here…

But he had gained so much, as well.

Jet and Effie were now safely back with the cohort. That had been the reason why Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had come to the mysterious place known as Wind Flower, in the first place… they had achieved their goal.

Unexpectedly, what they had gained, the forces of the Defilement had lost. Two members had rejoined the cohort, while two of the Six Plagues had perished. That was a truly surprising, but indescribably beneficial outcome. Sunny could hardly believe their luck…

Of course, it wasn't just luck. It was a combination of good fortune, their unrelenting efforts… and, to a large extent, of the nefarious schemes of the Mad Prince.

That was another thing Sunny had gained — knowledge. Knowledge

about the Mad Prince, yes, but also about so many other things

Some of the greatest mysteries of existence had been revealed to him on Aletheia's Island. The nature of the Dream Realm, the past atrocities of the Nightmare Spell, even the origin of his own world...

Perhaps even more importantly, Sunny had also learned a few things about himself. How he felt, what he wanted… and what he feared, as well.

Oh, and he had also become a Terror. His soul possessed six cores now, and he possessed six shadows. His power had once again grown, and there was now only one step separating him from its pinnacle.

Sunny had died countless times on Aletheia's Island. He had battled and slain many harrowing Nightmare Creatures, honing his skill and earning priceless battle experience. Some of them were far too deadly for a Master to face, and yet, in the end, all of them had perished, while he survived.

The entire island shuddered one last time and broke apart, falling into the abyssal darkness below. All the horrors, secrets, and treasures left behind by Aletheia of the Nine disappeared with it.

Standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Sunny let out a quiet sigh.

"...All in a day's work."

It was not a bad result.

The flying ship hovered in the air for a few moments, and then slowly started climbing down.

It was heading for the same lightless abyss that had swallowed the island…

Diving into the darkness that lay at the heart of the Great River.

Soon, the darkness welcomed them into its silent embrace.

[End of Part Two: Keeper of Truths.]

Chapter-1481: Emergency Repairs

The Chain Breaker was assaulted by hurricane winds as it plummeted into the heart of the colossal whirlpool. Nephis had yet to run out of essence, so their fall was controlled… for now.

However, that would change soon.

Sunny was still overwhelmed by the destruction of Aletheia's Island. Shaking off his reverie, he took a deep breath and forced himself to move.

All across the flying vessel, deep shadows stirred and surged forward, turning into inky-black hands. The manifested shadows pulled on the ropes, unfurling the horizontal sails. Those sails extended from both sides of the ship and were meant to help it glide on the winds.

At the same time, he nervously looked down.

…All Sunny could see was darkness.

It was not the true darkness that his sight had never been able to penetrate. Instead, the abyssal chasm was simply too deep for him to see anything.

'Great…'

By now, the slopes of the vortex had almost turned vertical. It was as if the Chain Breaker was surrounded by a vast wall of dark water, its current so fast that its surface was like a blur. At first, the dreadful maw of the whirlpool was dozens of kilometers wide, but the further they descended, the narrower it became.

Eventually, it was as if the Chain Breaker had entered a twisting

vertical tunnel that was just a few kilometers in diameter. They were surrounded by absolute darkness, with only a scattering of lanterns illuminating the deck. It was like a small island of light in an ocean of nothingness. No one except for Sunny could see the spinning walls of the tunnel… which was, perhaps, for the best.

He knew that if the ship touched the water, it would be torn apart by the tremendous pressure of the current.

'What the hell am I thinking? It's not for the best! Not at all!'

The Chain Breaker was falling vertically, for now, but it was only possible because Neph was still empowering its enchantments with her essence. Once her essence ran dry, they would have to move in a wide spiral along the watery walls of the tunnel to keep the ship balanced. Otherwise, it would be too easy for it to roll and overturn.

By then, not seeing where the darkness ended, and the furious current began, would be lethal.

Even worse, the tunnel was not strictly vertical. Looking down, Sunny could see it twisting and turning, like a descending tornado.

He gritted his teeth.

"Damnation…"

Could they even survive in this abyss without the Chain Breaker's enchantments?

He turned to look at the stern of the ship, where Nephis was struggling with the steering oars, but at that moment, Cassie's voice reached his ears:

"Sunny! Here!"

The blind girl was standing near the entrance to the main cargo hold, waving at him. Her voice sounded urgent.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then rushed to her side.

"What is it?"

She pulled him into the cargo hold, a grim expression on her face.

"I need your help… or rather, your Shadow's help. Summon her and make her as strong as possible. Please!"

Somewhat confused, Sunny lingered for a second, then called upon Saint and sent all six of his shadows to augment her. As soon as the taciturn knight appeared, her onyx armor shone with dark radiance, and a feeling of oppressive might emanated from her graceful figure.

Down in the cargo hold, various objects were neatly laid out on the wooden floor. There were amphorae containing strange liquids, brushes, stone etchings of complicated runes, mortars, and items that Sunny did not even know how to describe.

Most glaringly of all… the black stone from the hidden chamber of Aletheia's Tower was also there, illuminated by the faint radiance of the Guiding Light.

He gave Cassie a long look.

"What's this?"

The blind girl was already walking toward the black stone.

"We spent a lot of time inside the loop. Most of it was occupied by trying to escape… but I had plenty of time to think, as well. About how to repair the enchantment circuit of the Chain Breaker, in particular."

She stopped and pointed at the chunk of black rock.

"I need you to help me shatter it. I tried to do it myself… but I'm not strong enough."

Sunny felt a bit weird for a moment. It was as if she was asking him to open a jar of pickles for her… whatever that was. In any case, the jagged piece of black rock was not a jar of any sort. Instead, it was a mystical stone that was rumored to be a fragment of the Estuary.

Of course, Cassie was not strong enough to break it.

However, she was trying to finish repairing the runic circuit of the flying vessel, connecting its enchantments to the sacred tree. If Cassie succeeded in time… perhaps, they would not be torn apart by the current of the spinning tunnel.

Sunny wasn't sure if he was strong enough to crush the black stone, either. But Saint was a Transcendent Devil, and augmented by six shadows on top of that.

Glancing at the indifferent onyx knight, he gestured at the black stone. Her ruby eyes shone darkly, and, summoning her tenebrous blade, Saint took a step forward.

The black sword fell on the jagged piece of rock… and bounced away, not leaving even a single scratch on it. She lingered for a moment.

Then, a flood of darkness flowed from beneath Saint's armor, entering the black blade. The blade itself rippled and changed form, turning into a long, elegant lucerne.

The dark lucerne might have been elegant, but both its beak and hammerhead were capable of delivering truly devastating blows. A weapon such as this was far better suited for piercing armor and breaking bones than a sword was… so, it had a far better chance of shattering the mystical stone.

Saint took a step back, then slowly raised her weapon above her head…

And struck down with enough force to make Sunny stagger.

There was a flash, a shockwave, and a thunderous boom.

When he regained his vision once again, Saint had already lowered the lucerne. Her ruby eyes were cold and indifferent.

The black stone lay broken into several pieces.

Cassie pointed to them and said hurriedly:

"Again!"

Soon, the large pieces had turned into smaller ones, and then were finally ground into fine dust inside one of the mortars. The stone dust was then mixed with the strange liquid stored inside the ceramic vessels… some of which turned out to be blood. Hopefully, that of Nightmare Creatures.

By the time they emerged from the cargo hold, Nephis was running out of essence, and the Chain Breaker was growing more and more unstable.

Cassie hesitated for a moment, then pointed to the stern.

"Go! Help Neph!"

Sunny nodded and used Shadow Step to appear by Neph's side. Using his ability to see in the dark, he helped her guide the flying vessel into a spiraling descent. Nephis steered the ship, while Sunny played the role of a navigator.

Cassie, meanwhile, crawled along the grooves carved into the deck of the Chain Breaker, feverishly drawing runes on the ancient wood. Essence poured out of her, making the runes glimmer slightly before being absorbed into the deck. The sorcerous ink created from the dust of the black stone disappeared without leaving a trace.

Jet and Effie were helping her by carrying the amphorae containing ink and handing her brushes — each one only lasted a dozen seconds or so, gradually dissolving into thin air.

The flight of the Chain Breaker turned more and more unstable.

Eventually, Nephis gritted her teeth and slumped slightly, the runic circle surrounding her growing dim.

The flying ship shuddered.

With no more sorcery supporting it, it glided through the darkness, carried only by inertia and the wind pressure, which created a lifting force under the horizontal sails. Neph continued to hold the oars, trying her best to keep the Chain Breaker from plummeting into an uncontrollable fall.

Standing by her side, Sunny uttered a silent curse.

'Which idiot thought that this was a good idea?'

Oh… it was him. He had thought so.

The ancient vessel descended into the darkness, its speed increasing at a frightening rate. The angle of their descent was increasing, as well, slowly approaching the point where it would turn into a fatal nosedive.

Some distance away, near the sacred tree, Cassie threw the remains of another dissolved brush away and raised a hand to receive a new one. Patches of skin on her delicate hands had begun dissolving as well, and fresh blood mixed with the sorcerous ink.

'Are we going to have to abandon the ship?'

Sunny had the Dark Wing and the Heavenly Burden in his soul arsenal. He could also temporarily turn into a crow. The other members of the cohort had their own Memories to help them if not fly, then at least glide. Theoretically, they could continue the descent using those…

But somehow, he did not think that they would survive the depths of the Great River without the impregnable hull of the Chain Breaker.

The ancient vessel shuddered once again…

And then, the darkness was suddenly dispelled by a soft radiance.

Raising his head, Sunny watched the sacred tree in stunned silence.

Its leaves were shining with a pure, beautiful light.

At the same time, the runic circle surrounding Nephis ignited once more, and their flight turned as smooth as it had been before… much smoother, even.

Bathed in the radiance of the sacred tree, Cassie let out a tired sigh and slumped on the deck.

Finally, the enchantment circuit of the Chain Breaker had been fully restored.

Chapter-1482: Third Way

Illuminated by the gentle light of the sacred tree, the Chain Breaker was flying through the darkness. It moved in a wide spiral, descending lower and lower into the abyssal darkness with each spin. Around it, the moving walls of the dark tunnel were twisting and turning as the water comprising them revolved at a dreadful speed.

Now that Cassie had repaired the enchantment circuit of the ancient vessel, the immediate crisis was resolved. The members of the cohort finally received a chance to catch their breaths. The events of the past day had simply been too overwhelming… the destruction of the island had followed immediately after the battle with Undying Slaughter, and so, everyone was exhausted.

They simply dropped to the deck, praying that nothing terrible happened in the next few hours — minutes, even — at least. Sunny temporarily took the steering oars, allowing Nephis to heal Cassie's mangled hands. After that, everyone remained near the runic circle, looking into the darkness.

"Where do you think the vortex leads?"

Effie's voice sounded a bit stifled.

He lingered for a moment, then sighed.

"I don't really know. All I know is that someone passed through it and survived, in the past. Granted, that person was of the Supreme Rank."

Sunny paused for a moment and added, his voice somber:

"It might be the inner wall of the pyramid. In any case… we shall see."

After that, he glanced at Cassie. Now that they had been granted a

moment to compose themselves, his curiosity was tingling.

"By the way, why did you need that piece of rock to repair the ship?"

The others seemed curious, too. The blind girl hesitated for a bit, then explained:

"I guess… imagine a locked door. There are a few ways to get on the other side of the door. The simplest is to use a key — provided you have one. In this case, the key would have been the detailed knowledge of the original enchantment of the Chain Breaker. I do know a few things about it, but not enough."

She pointed to the runic circle, which glimmered faintly in the darkness.

"The second way is to be a locksmith who understands the structure of the door's lock — or any lock, really — on a deep level. That way, you can pick it without a key. Sadly, my knowledge of sorcery is not that deep. Which left only the third way… brute force."

Cassie briefly touched her hands. Under the influence of Neph's flame, her soft skin had regrown. There was no blood, bared flesh, and pale bone in sight. The ghastly wounds were gone.

"I don't know if that piece of rock really came from the Estuary, but it is definitely the same as the stone walls of the pyramid. Which means that it was a part of an Unholy Titan once. You have experience crafting extraordinary weapons yourself, so you know how much the material matters. Therefore… I simply borrowed the power of the material to make up for my lack of knowledge."

Sunny stared at her incredulously for a few moments, then let out a sigh.

"I don't think there was anything simple about what you did, but… okay."

Her explanation did make some sense. Sunny was not too knowledgeable about runic sorcery, not to mention the enchantments of the Chain Breaker. However, he was a modestly accomplished sorcerer himself. As such, he knew that a valuable material could

indeed substitute skill, sometimes.

For example, he would have to be a god of weaving to create an enchantment that could allow mundane steel to pierce the hide of a Great Beast — if such a thing was even possible. But if that mundane steel was replaced by the bones of a Great Tyrant, there was no need to even add an enchantment.

Weapons crafted from such bones would possess a mystical power of their own, and that power would be enough to kill the Great Beast. At least in the hands of someone as strong as Effie, and while the abomination's own mystical power was diminished by grievous wounds to its soul.

'I should remember this lesson well.'

Sunny had no doubt that he would create many Memories in the future. Before, he was mostly only worried about acquiring enough powerful soul shards and learning the patterns of varied weaves. Perhaps it was time to start concerning himself with searching for extraordinary materials, as well.

He smiled faintly.

"In any case… good job repairing the Chain Breaker. It was just in time."

There were a few moments of silence, and then Effie suddenly cleared her throat.

"Yeah, great job, Cassie! But, uh… can someone please explain to me how the hell is Chain Breaker here? What is it doing in our Nightmare?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Right. There was this mystery, as well…'

He and Nephis glanced at each other. A moment later, he said hesitantly:

"Honestly, we have no idea. You should already know about how

weird time functions inside the Tomb of Ariel… so, our current theory is that one of the previous owners of this ship visited the pyramid at some point. It was just drifting aimlessly far upstream. There was no one aboard and no signs of who that previous owner had been, so… Neph and I took it."

Effie looked at them with a strange expression, then grinned and patted the deck with her hand.

"Well… it's good that you did. I can't even describe how much I missed my cozy cabin while roaming the Great River on the back of a weird mutant shark. Look! The floor is solid! I might honestly cry!"

Still smiling, she turned to Jet and asked:

"So, what? You really got your Aspect Legacy?"

Jet glanced at her and shrugged.

"Yes. And before you ask… no, you can't eat it. Too bad you didn't receive anything cool yourself, huh?"

Effie's smile widened.

"Who says I didn't?"

With that, she stretched her long legs, assumed a more comfortable pose, and let out a small laugh.

"I did. If you consider a Supreme Memory cool, that is…"

Chapter-1483: Reaper's Scythe

The Aspect Legacy Jet had received was similar to most Aspect Legacies — which were usually Memories uniquely suited for the Aspects of their wielders, or much more rarely powerful Echoes. However, that similarity was deceitful.

In truth, Soul Reaper's Aspect Legacy was almost as weird as Sunny's. Although it looked like a weapon, it was not a Memory… instead, it was an Innate Ability. Jet did not need essence, no matter how little, to summon the chilling mist and turn it into a scythe. The mist was simply a part of her soul now.

Its form was also not set in stone. The mist blade naturally manifested into a beautiful war scythe, but it could assume the shape of other weapons, as well — as they watched, Jet turned it into a khopesh, a misericorde, a bec de corbin, and an actual scythe. There seemed to be only five available forms, at least for now.

All five shapes were that of a weapon, and that weapon was soulbound — but not in the way that Sunny's Marble Shell was soulbound.

In the case of the Marble Shell, its power was directly tied to the power of his soul. Jet's scythe, however, was bound to the souls of those it killed.

...Or rather, those souls would become bound to it.

None of them knew what it meant, precisely. However, Soul Reaper was able to conclude a couple of things from reading the description of this strange Innate Ability.

First of all, the mist blade was able to absorb and contain the souls of its victims. The soul of the most powerful being killed by it would become the basis of its power — so, if Jet slayed a Great Beast, her

scythe would become akin to a Supreme Memory of the First Tier. If she killed an Unholy Titan… the scythe would become akin to a Divine Memory of the Seventh Tier.

Which was a bizarre and truly astonishing quality.

Secondly, the souls contained within the mist could be consumed, replenishing Jet's essence. If all souls were consumed, leaving the mist blade empty, her own soul would become the basis of its power.

These were the things she knew. However, there were still many questions about her Aspect Legacy.

For example, how many souls could it contain? Would they only influence the mist blade's power, or would they also infuse it with unique qualities akin to enchantments? If so… if Jet consumed all the bound souls, what unique quality would her own soul infuse?

Although there were no answers, Sunny felt like the souls of the victims would indeed infuse the mist blade with unique enchantments. He also suspected that the number of souls the mist could contain… was five, one for each of the forms it could take. Equal to the Supreme Rank of Jet's Aspect.

He also suspected that if she consumed all five of the bound souls, the Aspect Legacy would become much more potent and dire.

The reason was rather simple… the only situation where Jet would burn both through her own essence and the souls stored inside the mist blade was a truly desperate situation. And those usually called for the most desperate solutions.

He wouldn't be surprised to learn that if the mist blade was devoid of bound souls… it could allow Soul Reaper to consume her own soul in order to accomplish something truly dire.

'How sinister…'

The beautiful war scythe was a dreadful thing, indeed.

Effie's Supreme Memory, meanwhile, was much less terrifying.

Which was not to say that it wasn't wondrous.

When the huntress first summoned the Memory, no one knew what to make of it. It was not a weapon, nor was it an armor. In fact, it did not resemble a tool or a garment, either… at best, it could pass for a charm.

The Memory looked like a large iron locket tied to a black leather cord. Inside the locket was an image of a meadow surrounded by tall hills, with a river running through it and a forest visible in the distance. A black dog was resting in the shade of a tall tree. The drawing was simple and crude, as if made by a child.

After looking at the weave of the Supreme Memory, Sunny was momentarily dazed. It was one of the most strange and intricate weaves he had ever seen.

There was something familiar about it, though. After pondering for a few moments, Sunny understood why he felt this sense of familiarity — it was because he had been studying the Covetous Coffer recently. And some parts of this startling new weave bore a distant resemblance to a few elements of what he had been staring at for the better part of the past week.

Effie confirmed his guess… the iron locket was a spatial storage Memory. However, it was entirely different from the Coffer.

That was because, unlike his toothy chest, the locket could store living beings.

Sunny was really surprised to hear that, but the vigorous huntress simply grinned and promptly demonstrated what she meant.

Before he knew it, the abyssal darkness of the vortex and the softly illuminated deck of the Chain Breaker disappeared. Instead, he was blinded by bright sunlight.

When Sunny was able to see again, he found himself standing on a green meadow.

There were tall hills in the distance, a forest to his right, and a river to his left. The only thing missing was a black dog.

For a few moments, he felt confused at the fact that there was only one sun in the sky. Where did the other six go?

Then, Sunny realized where he was and almost jumped in surprise.

He was just about to send his shadows to explore when Effie retrieved him from the Dog Locket. Suddenly, he was back on the deck of the Chain Breaker.

The huntress looked really curious.

"Oh… I see that you are alive. Good! Did it work?"

Sunny stared at her in outrage.

"Wha… what?! You weren't certain it would?"

Effie coughed.

"This is the first time I summoned the locket, so how would I know? Well… I was mostly certain. Yeah, definitely."

He shook his head in exasperation and took a deep breath.

"...Yes, it worked."

Sunny described what he had experienced.

After a bit of exploration, they discovered that the space contained within the locket was not too big. It was about three kilometers across, encompassing the meadow, several hills, a part of the forest, and the river. Beyond the boundary, the world turned into a crude painting, and it was impossible to move further.

Nevertheless, living beings could indeed be stored in that space. There was even water for them to drink and berries for them to gather in the forest. Needless to say, such a space could be extremely useful.

Sunny had never seen such a bizarre Memory.

'Wow. Supreme Memories are really on another level…'

The Crown of Twilight was already mind-boggling enough, but Effie's locket took the prize. Although it was not nearly as powerful as Daeron's crown, just in terms of uniqueness, it was far ahead.

'What a great prize.'

After taking a short rest, the cohort concentrated on traveling deeper into the abyssal tunnel.

Chapter-1484: Radiant Depths

Surrounded by darkness, the Chain Breaker continued to travel down the twisting underwater tunnel. Cassie had taken up the steering oars, which alleviated some of Sunny's nervousness — while she was the most experienced helmsman among them, he barely knew what he was doing.

So, the chances of the flying ship colliding with the walls of the tunnel and being torn apart by the water current were reduced by a lot with the blind seer at the helm.

Still… no one knew what waited for them in the depths of the Great River. They were nervous, apprehensive, and full of grim anticipation.

The cohort rested, consumed a hearty meal, and went about repairing the slight damage dealt to the flying ship by its crash landing on Aletheia's Island. The enchanted hull weathered the rough landing well, only receiving a few shallow scrapes. However, there were more delicate parts of the ship that had to be mended or replaced.

Sunny, Nephis, Jet, and Effie were not carpenters or builders, but their skill was enough for the task — after all, Sunny was a specialist in wilderness survival, while Nephis had been able to build boats all the way back on the Forgotten Shore. Effie had the experience of surviving in the Dark City for years, while Jet... was Jet. She was somehow capable of doing anything that needed to be done.

Later, they gathered on the deck and silently observed the darkness below.

After a while, Sunny grew bored and summoned the Covetous Coffer. Borrowing Effie's locket, he began comparing the two weaves with each other. He was very curious to see if he could make the storage inside the Coffer habitable, as well… for now, it seemed incredibly

far-fetched.

But then again, many of the things he had accomplished seemed far-fetched once. If he was not capable of doing something today, he might be able to do it in the future. Becoming a competent sorcerer was a gradual process.

Time slowly passed.

And as it did, the depths of the Great River slowly changed.

It was not something that they could see or hear, but more of a vague, eerie, oppressive feeling. Although the Chain Breaker was surrounded by water and had descended deep below the surface of the River by now, none of them could perceive what hid beyond the spinning walls of the twisting tunnel.

However, it seemed as if… the absolute darkness that surrounded them was somehow growing darker and darker with each hour that passed.

Sunny felt… a sense of immense threat. Cassie was pale, as well. It was as if they were surrounded by terrifying danger from all sides, worse even than it had been in the flowing mist of Aletheia's Island.

However, if there was some harrowing being in the water, it did not enter the tunnel to swallow them whole.

...Remembering how much the dreadful whirlpool resembled a colossal maw, Sunny could only hope that it was not because they were already in the being's intestines.

'Maybe whatever creatures dwell in the unfathomable depth simply can't exist outside of water… or maybe the current of the tunnel walls is as dangerous to them as it is to the Chain Breaker.'

Calming himself like that, he tried to find distraction in weaving.

A few more hours passed.

Eventually, Nephis stood up and looked around with a slight frown on her face.

"...Don't you think that it's getting brighter?"

Then, the others noticed it, too. The darkness seemed slightly less impenetrable now.

The process continued. Slowly but surely, the dark mass of water was starting to glow. The darkness was dispelled, and instead, a blinding radiance surrounded them from all sides. It was so bright that Sunny couldn't open his eyes for a while.

'What… what's this…'

The abyssal tunnel was now a tunnel of radiant light. It was as if they were traveling through the depths of a star.

"It's the suns!"

Sunny was confused by Jet's words at first. But then, he understood.

'Ah… of course…'

Every evening, the seven suns seemed to dive into the Great River. And every night, the Great River started to glow. Its shine was soft, dreamlike, and iridescent.

However, that was on the surface. What would that light look like in the unfathomable depths?

They were currently learning the answer.

Soon, Sunny's eyes adjusted to the brightness, and he cautiously opened them.

The members of the cohort were all frozen still, observing the radiant world around them.

It was… beautiful.

But also harrowing.

A moment later, Sunny shuddered and took an involuntary step back.

Somewhere out there, in the blinding light… a shadow suddenly

moved, so colossal that it dimmed the radiance of the water for a few moments. Its size was so immense that he struggled to comprehend it. And its shape…

As soon as Sunny tried to ascertain it, it was as if he had lost consciousness for several seconds. When he came back to his senses, the shadow had disappeared somewhere far below, and he was covered in cold sweat. His head was pulsing with a splitting ache.

'T—that thing… how far away was it?'

What was it?

He looked at the members of the cohort and found them in a similar state to his. Especially Cassie, who was blind, but also saw much more than anyone else…

Then, the brightness of the water changed once again as another inconceivable shadow moved through its radiant mass, far in the distance.

He shivered.

"Go inside."

Cassie's voice was hoarse. Lowering her head, she sighed and repeated herself:

"Go inside. Don't return until it's dark again. It's not good for you to stay here."

Nephis looked at her for a moment, then frowned:

"What about you? We won't leave you alone."

The blind girl shook her head.

"I'll be fine. I won't be able to see anything if you leave, anyway. Most importantly…"

She shivered slightly.

"...nothing will be able to gaze back at me. Go."

Sunny knew all too well that some Nightmare Creatures felt when someone was looking at them. That was why people had to be careful where they turned their eyes in the Dream Realm, especially in those regions of it where true horrors dwelled. That was why he did not try to dissuade Cassie and silently pulled Nephis toward the entrance to the lower decks.

He recalled his shadows, as well.

Jet and Effie followed.

They spent some time together at the mess deck, but no one was in the mood to talk. It felt as if the smallest sound could be heard by the beings that moved in the depths of the Great River… and so, after a while, the members of the cohort left for their cabins and tried to fall asleep.

The merciless light bathed the Chain Breaker for a few more hours, and then grew dim.

Finally, it disappeared entirely, replaced once again by absolute darkness.

The spinning tunnel continued to lead them down, down, down… down into the unfathomable depths.

The Great River was rumored to be bottomless, and surrounded by the darkness, Sunny could easily believe that it was.

However, he also felt that if they survived a few more days of the descent…

Perhaps they would prove the rumors wrong.

Chapter-1485: Traversing the Vortex

Traveling through the twisting underwater tunnel was a constant struggle… but, strangely enough, it was mostly safe. Just as Wind Flower had said, as long as the Chain Breaker did not touch the water, there was little inside the vortex that could threaten them.

If the flying ship did touch the spinning walls of the tunnel, though, death was all but guaranteed — not only because of the terrible current and the obliterating pressure, but also because causing even the smallest ripple was going to alert the harrowing beings dwelling in the unfathomable depth of the Great River of their presence.

Staying away from the walls was not challenging at first, but the deeper they descended, the more perilous that situation became. The tunnel grew narrower, while its twists became more frequent and steep with each passing day. Sometimes, it bent so much that the Chain Breaker flew forward for a while instead of continuously descending.

It was as though they were really traveling through the intestines of an unimaginable beast.

Worse of all was the fact that the tunnel was not static. It constantly moved, undulating, making it seem as though the walls of spinning water were pursuing the graceful ship.

Perhaps they were.

Sometimes, the water was shrouded in abyssal darkness. Sometimes, it shone with blinding light.

Nephis steered the ship in the darkness, but when the depths of the Great River ignited with beautiful radiance, Cassie had to take the

oars. The rest of them were forced to escape to the interior of the flying vessel, leaving her to face the harrowing shapes moving through the radiant water alone.

Anyone would have been shaken and mentally strained by having to endure the horror and pressure of those terrible creatures in solitude. Despite that, Cassie remained calm and seemingly unperturbed… Sunny did not know if that was a good sign or not.

What he did know, however, was that they would have never survived the journey through the vortex without the Chain Breaker. They would have been long swallowed by the Great River if Cassie had not repaired the enchantment circuit, as well.

As it was… Sunny felt that they would, perhaps, make it to the other side of the vortex unscathed.

Days passed in tense silence. The deeper they descended, the more palpable the pressure assaulting their minds was. The abyssal darkness was suffocating, and the radiant light was dreadful. More than that… at some point, the world itself became strange, playing tricks with their minds.

Time was growing convoluted and elusive, as if it, too, was being crushed by the oppressive weight of the water surrounding them. Sunny and Nephis, who had already experienced something similar in the time storm, were less affected by this strangeness than the other members of the cohort. However, eventually, they too grew accustomed to the eerie unstableness of time.

With time, space had also become unreliable.

At first, Sunny thought that it was the Chain Breaker's flight that had lost its smoothness, making the flying ship shake and shudder from time to time. Sometimes, it would jerk, and sometimes, it would sway.

But then, he realized that it was the fabric of reality itself that had become twisted.

He understood it while carrying a cup of tea, brewed with the

invigorating water of the Endless Spring, to Nephis. Usually, a walk from the lower deck entrance to the stern would have taken him less than a minute, and a few dozen steps. However, this time, Sunny counted at least several hundred steps before reaching the runic circle.

The tea he was carrying was still hot and steaming, though.

'That is… not good.'

He stared at the tea cup in his hand, then at Nephis, who was steering the ship without seemingly having noticed anything strange.

'What if it was not the deck that had been stretched like a rubber band, but one of us?'

What if the space between the ship and the walls of the tunnel suddenly contracted?

Suddenly, the surrounding darkness seemed much more terrifying.

But there was nothing any of them could do about it. Worrying about being torn apart by fractured space was not going to do him any good, either.

So, Sunny distracted himself by concentrating on weaving.

After around seven cycles of darkness and light — he couldn't tell exactly how many because of how strange time had become — he successfully altered the [Capacious Chest] enchantment of the Covetous Coffer to allow it to store living beings. He had not copied the weave of a Supreme Memory, but rather borrowed a few elements from it.

Sadly, it was a futile effort. Sunny might have changed the weave of the enchantment to remove the limitation on inanimate objects, but he was nowhere near knowing how to integrate a livable space into the chest's storage space. There was no meadow, no forest, and no river inside of it.

Which meant that there was also no light, no water, and no air there. There was nothing at all. So, unless he wanted a living being to

suffocate to death, placing them inside was out of the question.

Theoretically, he was able to hide his shadows in the Covetous Coffer now, since they did not need to breathe. However, Sunny struggled to imagine why he would want to do such a thing. Maybe to punish them for misbehaving…

He did not share these thoughts with the shadows, but they still started to avoid the toothy chest, for some reason.

Time slowly passed.

Or, maybe, it was passing quickly.

All Sunny knew was that the depths of the Great River seemed more and more dreadful each time he looked into the abyssal darkness. Even Cassie was starting to look unnerved.

The tunnel was not getting narrower anymore. However, its twists and turns were becoming wilder.

And then, one day…

The Chain Breaker seemed to stop.

Sunny was startled as the familiar feeling of motion completely disappeared. Standing up from where he was sitting, he noticed the other members of the cohort looking perplexed.

Then, he heard Neph's stifled yelp.

Looking at the stern, he saw her gripping the steering oars so hard that her hands had turned white. She was moving both oars in a strange manner… not slowly and smoothly, like usual, but instead forcefully and with a sense of urgency.

'What the hell?'

Why was Nephis even moving the oars if they were standing still?

Looking at the walls of the tunnel, Sunny flinched.

The walls… had turned into a blur.

The Chain Breaker was frozen in place, but the tunnel itself was flying past it at tremendous speed. The twists and turns that Nephis had been cautiously navigating were now flashing past them, forcing her to steer the ship as fast as she could… and much faster than that, even, if they wanted to survive.

'Doesn't make any sense…'

Sunny was confused for a moment.

How could the flying ship both remain in place and be steered around the bends of the tunnel?

It was as if the world itself was being spun and moved by Neph's hands.

But then again, when was the last time the world made any sense?

Perhaps the static position of the Chain Breaker was simply a matter of perspective. Perhaps, they were simply being carried by some unfathomable, eerie force.

What did it matter?

The only thing that mattered was for Nephis to guide them through the swiftly moving tunnel.

And she did. Completely focused, she guided the Chain Breaker, not allowing the water to swallow it. A minute past, then another, then another…

Then, an eternity.

Suddenly, the tunnel disappeared.

Something flashed, blinding Sunny, and was then replaced by darkness. He could feel motion once again.

…In fact, he could feel a lot of motion!

It was as if the Chain Breaker had been shot from a catapult. Their speed was so dreadful that he was instantly blown back a dozen meters, and only managed to remain on the ship by clutching at the railing.

'D—damn!'

Sunny felt a tremendous force pushing him back, and a hurricane wind crashing into him with primal fury. All he could do was grit his teeth and hold on for his dear life.

Slowly, their speed decreased. Nephis, who had been pressed into the aplustre, pushed one of the oars and rolled the ship.

It was only then that Sunny realized that the Chain Breaker had been flying upside down.

As the flying ship revolved around its axis, Sunny fell on the deck and weakly picked himself up.

It seemed that they had escaped the vortex.

Chapter-1486: Colorful Ribbon

The Chain Breaker was still flying at high speed in the direction it had been expelled from the vortex. Thankfully, Nephis had rolled the ship in time, preventing the members of the cohort from plummeting down… but Sunny was still pressed into the deck, struggling to stand up.

The world was dark, with only the soft glow of the sacred tree illuminating it.

Finally, he rose to his feet, swayed slightly, and called out in a stifled voice:

"Is… is everyone alive?"

He could see Nephis nearby... she was safe. Looking across the deck, he noticed Effie leaning on the sacred tree, a startled expression on her face. Luckily, the huntress did not look injured.

Jet was a bit further away. It seemed that she had used the fifth form of her mist blade, the scythe, as a hook to keep herself in place. Her icy blue eyes were alert and focused.

Cassie had been sleeping in her cabin when the strange event happened, so she was definitely fine — the blind girl might have suffered a few bruises, but she wouldn't have been thrown overboard.

"I'm fine!"

"Alive is a strong word…"

Hearing Effie and Jet answer his question, Sunny let out a relieved sigh. Almost at the same time, Cassie appeared from below the deck, looking a bit haggard.

With each member of the cohort accounted for, he relaxed a little.

They seemed to have escaped the dreadful whirlpool. At least it looked that way.

The twisting tunnel was gone, replaced by a vast empty space. The oppressive feeling Sunny had felt in the depths of the Great River was gone, too, and time seemed to be flowing naturally as well.

Space, however…

Space was a bit strange.

Sunny struggled to describe the wrongness he felt, but it was definitely there. Humans, after all, were not meant to perceive the fabric of space — why would they, considering that it was meant to be constant and immutable?

But many immutable concepts had become vague with the descent of the Spell. Especially here in the Tomb of Ariel, many things that he had considered absolute had proven to be less than reliable. The existence of the Tomb was in and of itself a paradox, considering that it contained an entire world.

Nevertheless, even though Sunny could not perceive the fabric of space, he could still sense that something was wrong with it. He just could not explain what.

'What is going on? No, first… where are we?'

There was no sound of the water splashing against the hull of the Chain Breaker, no sunlight, no glow that suffused the Great River at night. There was only darkness, silence, and wind.

Frowning, Sunny glanced at Nephis. She was still holding the steering oars, but at the moment, there was nothing for her to do. The ship was still flying… rising?... due to inertia, and it was impossible to control it until that inertia dissipated.

He studied her face, making sure that Nephis was alright, and then looked behind her. There was nothing there… only a vast, boundless darkness.

The wind played with her beautiful silver hair.

Neph looked at him, too. She hesitated for a few moments, then said cautiously:

"I think… we have left the vortex."

That was self-evident. No, actually… it was not. Nobody knew what was at the heart of the Great River, so there could very well be a vast empty space inside it. However, somehow, Sunny did not feel as if they were buried under an inconceivable mass of flowing water.

So, what then? Had they reached the bottom of the Great River?

If so, then why had they been thrown up instead of being thrown down? In fact… the Chain Breaker was still rising, even though the speed of its ascent was growing slower and slower with each second.

"What the hell happened?"

Nephis looked uncertain. She frowned, struggling to find an answer, and eventually said with no confidence in her tone:

"I'm not sure. It felt… as if we had crossed a boundary of some sort. You saw what happened next yourself."

She wanted to say something else, but then suddenly froze.

A few moments later, her eyes widened a little.

Nephis raised a hand and pointed at something.

"Sunny… behind you…"

Sunny knew that there was nothing immediately behind him — otherwise, he would have felt it through shadow sense. Frowning, he turned around and looked into the darkness beyond.

It was just as empty as what he had seen before, but when he shifted his gaze lower…

Sunny grew still.

'What… am I looking at?'

There was nothing behind Nephis. But in the direction where he was currently looking, something floated in the darkness. It was like a colorful ribbon painted in lilac, azure, and crimson, with parts of it drowning in shadows. Seven small motes of light slowly moved through the darkness around it, making for a beautiful sight.

The ribbon created a circle, its surface twisted on itself like a Möbius strip.

It took Sunny a few moments to realize what the ribbon was.

'It's… it's… the Great River…'

His eyes widened, as well.

Because there was nothing but emptiness between the Chain Breaker and the colorful ribbon, it was all but impossible to determine distance, and therefore scale. However, he knew…

Lilac, azure, and crimson were the three regions of the Great River — dawn, day, and dusk. The seven little motes of light were the seven suns. The areas of the ribbon where the light of the suns did not reach were shrouded in shadows… however, at least one sun was always on the opposite side of the ribbon, its light penetrating the mass of water and making the water glow.

The Chain Breaker was… far, far away from the Great River.

And the empty darkness around them was the interior of the Tomb of Ariel.

However, Sunny forgot all about the black pyramid and its creator.

His eyes were locked on the beautiful ribbon… which twisted on itself… like a Möbius strip…

His whole body shuddered, and his face turned deathly pale.

His heart was suddenly consumed by dread.

His mind was deathly still.

His lips trembled.

Sunny felt like he was suffocating.

'...It's a loop.'

The Great River twisted on itself, flowing endlessly, its surface never interrupted.

The Great River… the entirety of it… was an infinite loop.

Chapter-1487: The Source

Sunny stared at the distant Great River, frozen in place. His face was motionless.

However, there was a storm raging in his mind. Fragmented truths that he had learned, witnessed, and experienced in the Tomb of Ariel were moving, colliding with each other, and clicking in place with a dreadful noise. The inconceivable truth of their Nightmare was slowly revealing itself.

From start to finish... it was all...

He was suddenly overcome with fear.

Shifting his gaze slightly, Sunny studied the beautiful ribbon that twisted on itself, forming an infinite loop.

Deep crimson, vibrant azure, soft lilac... the seven suns shining in the darkness...

It was like a dream.

'How can this be? How can the Great River flow in a circle?'

But then again… of course, it could.

In hindsight, it made so much sense.

There had always been a paradox in how the Great River was described. Because it was always described as "endless"... Sunny had not paid it much attention before, assuming that the word was simply there to provide flavor. But he should have known better. The Spell was always deliberate with its choice of words.

The description of the Stifled Scream read:

[...a great river was contained within it, flowing endlessly from the future into the past.]

But how could a river of time be endless? The past wasn't infinite. If the Great River really flowed into the past, anyone sailing it would reach the point beyond the origin of time eventually — so, by definition, it could not flow endlessly.

Only it could. Because its estuary was also its source… within the Tomb of Ariel, the past was connected to the future, creating a single whole. The proof was right in front of him.

There was a reason why the Nightmare Creatures populating the Great River were most powerful in the far reaches of the past, near the Estuary, and in the far reaches of the future, where Sunny had initially come from. The two were one and the same.

He frowned, then shook his head.

'No, wait… that doesn't make sense.'

If the Great River was an infinite loop, and the past turned into the future, having no end… then what about the Estuary? The existence of the Estuary was also undeniable. Not only was it mentioned in the descriptions of the Stifled Scream and the Shroud of Graceless Dusk, but it was the reason why the Seekers of Truth had come to the Tomb of Ariel, as well.

They had come to find the secrets that the Demon of Dread had hidden in the estuary of the Great River…

The hideous truth he had wished to be free of.

And when Aletheia, the First Seeker, had finally found it, the Defilement was born.

The whole purpose of the Great River was to reach a point before time existed — before the gods were born, and therefore outside their control. At least that was what Sunny and Nephis believed.

So how could there be no Estuary?

'There is. The Estuary exists.'

Shifting his gaze, Sunny studied the length of the beautiful ribbon. From this distance, he could not really see the current of the Great River, but he did see a few things.

For example, a stretch of it was shrouded in boiling clouds, which gave birth to immense cyclones. That was the area of the river that corresponded to the end days of the Doom War, while the cyclones were the time storms it created.

The colossal whirlpool where Aletheia's Island had been situated was hidden from view, but Sunny saw a tiny speck on the crimson layer of the twisting ribbon. That was Fallen Grace. He thought he saw another city on the lilac layer. That had to be Twilight…

The second most noticeable anomaly, though, was a spot where the surface of the Great River was obscured by mist. The mist was absolutely impenetrable, covering a considerable length of the river. The flow of time near it seemed restless even from a distance, which meant that it was absolutely devastating up close.

Sunny suddenly felt cold, realizing that not only was there an Estuary…

'No, that is… that is impossible.'

…But he had already brushed against it.

Something seemed to explode in his head.

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'Of course…'

Looking at the distant Great River, Sunny took a shaky breath.

He was remembering the first few days he had spent in the Nightmare, drifting on a piece of flotsam in a place shrouded in mist

Back then, everything about the situation had seemed strange and bizarre. So, he had never properly questioned where that place was.

However, now that he thought about it… even considering the general weirdness of the Great River, those first days were especially odd.

The mist, the piece of flotsam, and what had happened next…

Actually, Sunny had never seen his makeshift raft sailing out of the mist. Instead, he simply heard the water roaring and was thrown underwater when the suddenly furious current overturned the piece of flotsam. By the time he resurfaced, the seven suns were shining above his head.

Most importantly, the mist was nowhere to be seen — upstream or downstream. All around him, there was only the sparkling, dreamlike expanse of the Great River, as if the mist had never existed at all. There were also the demented runes carved into the underside of his raft.

…It was almost as if he had been sent there through time and space instead of simply being carried downstream by the current.

And now, Sunny felt almost certain that that was exactly what had happened.

That misty place where he had spent the first few days of the Nightmare… was the outer boundary of the Estuary. It was also the source of the Great River.

It was a place between the past and the future, where the laws of time were twisted and broken. The entrance to the true Estuary — the space that existed beyond time, containing Ariel's secrets — was hidden somewhere in the mist.

Aletheia had found it, but Sunny simply drifted past, being carried by the current. When the piece of flotsam reached the boundary of the Source, he was expelled from it, appearing in the far reaches of the future — in the area of the Great River corresponding to the point in time where the person whose role he took had entered the Tomb of Ariel.

'Wait…'

Sunny was suddenly covered in cold sweat when he remembered a few more details about his time in the mist… in the Boundary.

Hadn't he been tormented by nightmares of madness, despair, and dreadful obsession there? Hadn't he screamed, waking up…

'No, no… not again… please…'

Hadn't the Sin of Solace inexplicably become perfectly complete and real out there, in the mist?

And the Great River… was a loop…

Sunny shuddered.

A terrible premonition grasped his heart with icy claws.

Sitting on the deck of the Chain Breaker, he gazed at the distant river and whispered:

"The Six Plagues… are not the future versions of ourselves."

Sunny closed his eyes.

"...They are our past. They are us from the previous revolution of the Great River."

Chapter-1488: The First Plague

Sunny felt a headache approaching.

Something was very wrong here.

How could the Six Plagues exist?

The Great River was a time loop — just like Aletheia's Island had been, but also different.

On Aletheia's Island, time moved in a circle. A single day endlessly repeated itself, and a new cycle started each time that day ended. The Great River, however, was a bizarre place where time and space were one and the same — it flowed from the future into the past, and so, those who traveled it were also traveling across time.

The cycles of the Great River did not start once a certain period of time passed. They were both a measure of time and a measure of space — to reach a new revolution, a person had to travel all the way to the Estuary, which was also the Source, and cross the boundary between the past and the future.

Then, they would be sent to the point in time and space when they had first entered the Tomb of Ariel. So, if the Chain Breaker sailed past Verge and braved the Source, the members of the cohort would be sent to different places on the first day after they had entered the Nightmare.

Sunny would find himself on a piece of flotsam, Nephis would be stranded on the corpse of the Black Turtle, Cassie would return to Fallen Grace on the day the other sybil succumbed to the Defilement, and Jet and Effie would be back to living the harsh lives of the River Nomads.

Sunny shifted slightly.

Still, it did not explain how both the members of the cohort and the Six Plagues could exist at the same time. If their version from the previous cycle had braved the Source — on purpose or by accident, while searching for the entrance into the Estuary — they would have disappeared.

More than that, the Plagues had been rampaging across the Great River for decades, perhaps even centuries. How could that be?

'Well, why not? There's all kinds of weirdness happening with time in the Tomb of Ariel. Do I really want to doubt that something like that is possible?'

Especially now that Sunny knew about the Source — a misty place where the past and the future met, and where the meaning of time lost all reason — he could not be surprised by anything.

What would happen, for example, if someone entered the Source, but then turned back and left the way they had come instead of crossing the boundary of the future? What would happen if they left from a different point than where they had entered? What would happen if they stayed inside the Source for a while, allowing the current to move past them?

He did not know.

Sunny did know one thing, however.

The method of starting a new revolution might have been different from Aletheia's Island, but its effect would be the same.

Once someone returned to the past, their memory of the previous cycle would be erased. Their soul would be restored to how it had been before. No signs of them having traveled the Great River in the past would remain.

Which meant…

Sunny shivered.

'Not again, please!'

The words he had shouted while waking up, on the first day in the Nightmare, echoed in his ears.

'H—how… how many times have we challenged this Nightmare?'

The existence of the Six Plagues proved that there had been at least two cycles. But there could have been more. Ten cycles… a hundred cycles… a thousand cycles…

There was no way to tell. Since no one remembered the previous revolutions, nothing would change when a new one started. They would repeat the same actions over and over again, just like Jet had fought and been killed by Undying Slaughter over and over again.

Until Sunny arrived, and became aware of the loop.

Suddenly, he felt his heart beating wildly.

'Wait…'

Despite being trapped in the time loop of Aletheia's Island, Sunny had eventually gained the ability to remember the previous revolutions. He did not know how long it had taken, but at some point, he was assaulted by a persistent sense of déjà vu, and then became fully aware of the loop.

That was because the Sin of Solace was stuck in his mind, and the loathsome sword wraith was somehow immune to the effect of the repeating time.

Sunny felt that he was on the verge of realizing something extremely important.

'The Sin of Solace…'

The Mad Prince was haunted by the odious apparition, as well.

So, if the cohort was trapped in the infinite loop, didn't it mean…

That he would have gained the ability to remember the previous cycles of the Great River, as well?

'D—damnation!'

Sunny's eyes widened.

The Mad Prince… no, perhaps even an earlier versions of himself… would have realized the cyclical nature of the Great River. And from that point forward, each cycle would have been different.

Because Sunny had become a variable.

He must have tried to change things. He must have tried to conquer the Nightmare desperately… and in such a way that none of the members of the cohorts died.

And Nephis survived till the end.

...But, for some reason, he had failed.

Or maybe that mission had been doomed from the start.

Had he become aware of the grand loop before and after becoming infected by the Defilement?

The Defilement, after all… was knowledge. Terrible knowledge that corrupted the souls of those who possessed it. So, even if Sunny reached the Source and returned into the past after being infected by the Defilement, the infection would have returned with him.

Had he gone mad under the mental strain of endless loops first, or had he found the true Estuary and been driven insane by the Defilement first?

Had Sunny been the first of the Six Plagues, and the one who had infected the other five?

In any case…

'So why do I not remember anything? If my version from the previous cycle was corrupted by the Defilement, why is my soul free of it?'

He flinched.

Wasn't the answer obvious?

What could cure the infection of cursed knowledge?

…Oblivion could.

In order to be cured, he had to forget the cursed knowledge before returning to the past.

'The Key of the Estuary.'

A mysterious Memory that had been there, in his soul, when he found himself in the mist on the first day of the Nightmare. A Memory that possessed a passive enchantment that did not seem to have any effect on him.

An enchantment that consisted of two parts — one directed outward, one directed inward.

And which had something to do with the Sin of Solace.

Sunny took a deep breath as the truth of the Estuary Key finally revealed itself.

'It's... a muzzle.'

The purpose of the mysterious Memory… was to prevent the Sin of Solace from sharing any knowledge of the previous cycles with Sunny. So that he never remembered what had happened in the past, and therefore never learned the cursed knowledge of Defilement.

That was one part of its enchantment. The other, much more burdensome part… was meant to make the Estuary Key immune to the change of cycles. To make it remain in Sunny's soul even if he crossed the boundary of the Source and was sent into the past.

That was why the Mad Prince had been so interested in the Great Tyrant slain by the Serpent King in Aletheia's Tower. Because the Tyrant remained dead no matter how many revolutions passed… its death had been made permanent, carrying over from one cycle of the loop to the next.

Back then, the Defiled madman must have already been trying to create the Estuary Key.

To cure himself of the Defilement… and make another attempt to conquer the Nightmare. No, not just conquer it, but do it in a specific way.

To erase the mistake he had made... or maybe the crime he had committed.

'Murderer...'

Sunny gulped for air.

At that moment, he realized something else.

There were only three of the Six Plagues left: Soul Stealer, Torment, and the Dread Lord.

The Mad Prince… was gone.

He did not exist in the Tomb of Ariel anymore.

Because he had crossed the boundary of the Source and sent himself into the past.

He had become Sunny.

Chapter-1489: A Variable

It had to be true.

The Mad Prince must have traveled in time to become Sunny… for one simple reason. Sunny could not possess the Key of the Estuary otherwise.

He took a deep breath and grasped his head, feeling dazed.

'There are answers… too many answers. For once.'

The turbulent swarm of revelations was yet to settle in his mind, and there was no clear picture.

'Everything makes sense now. But also, nothing makes sense.'

Sunny felt that he understood the true nature of the Great River. He also understood the sequence of events that had transpired prior to the current cycle. It all came together nicely… except for one glaring inconsistency.

The existence of the Six Plagues was a paradox that could not be explained by what he knew. But that was alright. He did not know everything, after all, especially not in a place as bizarre as the Tomb of Ariel.

However, if Sunny simply accepted the paradoxical existence of the Plagues as fact, everything would fall into place. For example, the fact that Wind Flower had met both the Mad Prince and Sunny — just like Effie and Jet coexisted with Devouring Beast and Undying Slaughter, Sunny coexisted with the memories of his previous self.

The vile madman was gone, but the scars he had left on the Great River remained. Like Weave, which he had destroyed. Or Ananke, whom he doomed to a life of loneliness and loss.

'So, how did it all happen?'

Sunny contemplated the Third Nightmare, numb to his surroundings.

The first thing he had to admit was that he did not know, and would most likely never learn, what the initial shape of the Nightmare had been. The reality of the Great River had been irrevocably changed by the Six Plagues. So, the challenge the original cohort had faced was entirely different.

It was the Six Plagues, after all, who had taken control of Verge and led the forces of the Defilement to devour the cities of the River People, undoubtedly accelerating the demise of the River Civilization. Without them, the cohort might have found many powerful allies to aid them in slaying the First Seeker.

However, during that first cycle, something had gone wrong. Somehow, the cohort ended up entering the Source instead of laying siege to Verge…

'No, not quite right.'

It was possible that everyone had entered the Source — but not necessarily so. Sunny could have attempted to find the Estuary alone, for some reason. But he definitely had entered the mist and crossed the boundary. That was how the first cycle had ended.

And, therefore, an unknown number of cycles began.

Eventually, influenced by the [Hideous Truth] enchantment of the Sin of Solace, Sunny had grown immune to losing his memory of the past cycles. Becoming... a variable. A single variable that broke the system, introducing chaos to a predetermined flow of events.

At that point, several things could have happened.

Perhaps he continued to search for a way to conquer the Nightmare and preserve the lives of his companions, failing cycle after cycle and eventually going mad. Perhaps, guided by unknown reasons, he continued to search for the entrance to the Estuary that was hidden somewhere in the mist of the Source. Perhaps, by then, he was already infected by the cursed knowledge of the Defilement.

In any case, eventually, there came a time when Sunny was returned to the beginning of the Nightmare already harboring the seed of Corruption in his mind.

And that, of course, changed everything.

The other members of the cohort were infected by the Defilement, as well.

Nephis died at their hands.

…Kneeling on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Sunny shivered. His face was deathly pale.

'What happened next, then?'

It was obvious…

The Mad Prince was released from Shadow Bond, finally fulfilling his wish… becoming free.

However, his freedom did not last long.

Ironically, the madman was enslaved by one of the people he had surrendered to the Defilement — Kai. Then, the corrupted cohort found a new goal. To conquer the Nightmare and be released into the real world by obliterating the River People civilization.

And so…

They somehow found a way to travel into the distant past, to the days long before the first day of the Nightmare… and at the same time became foreign invaders of the new cycle. Sunny did not know how, but he had an inkling that the Source and the Estuary were somehow responsible for the birth of this bizarre and eerie paradox.

Over time, the members of the corrupted cohort grew stronger, eventually Transcending… or rather, falling deeper into Corruption. Ananke had already told Sunny that it was possible for those who followed the path of Ascension to reach Transcendence without conquering a Third Nightmare. Similarly, it was possible for Fallen Nightmare Creatures to become Corrupted.

The Fallen Terror of the Crimson Spire, for example, had been evolving into a Corrupted Titan when Nephis killed her. The former members of Neph's cohort achieved a similar feat inside the Tomb of Ariel.

And thus, the Six Plagues were born.

They subjugated Verge and led the forces of the Defilement to annihilate the River People. Even Twilight, the city of challengers led by the Serpent King, fell to their insidiousness and might.

They should have conquered the Nightmare decades ago, by all accounts…

If not for the Mad Prince.

An eerie, twisted smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

Conquering the Nightmare was what the Dread Lord wanted. But it was not what his slave wanted.

And so, the vile madman conspired against his master.

It seemed that the Mad Prince was still harboring a desperate obsession. One that had nothing to do with spreading the Defilement to every corner of the Tomb of Ariel, obliterating the River Civilization, or unleashing the Six Plagues into the real world.

Sunny did not know what that obsession was…

But he could guess.

'Be careful of what you wish for.'

Those were the words that the Mad Prince had carved into the piece of flotsam drifting in the mist of the Source, over and over again, with his nails. It wasn't hard to guess that he regretted fulfilling his wish.

What did Sunny want?

To be free.

That wish of his… had killed Nephis.

He shuddered.

'The Mad Prince, that bastard… was that what he wanted to achieve?'

To rewrite history and ensure that Nephis survives.

'Perhaps…'

And so, the Mad Prince started scheming as he prepared for the arrival of the members of the cohort. He trapped Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast on Aletheia's Island. He had met with Wind Flower and learned how to create the Estuary Key.

He massacred Weave, and then sent a dream message to Ananke, instructing her to meet Sunny and Nephis in the far reaches of the future when the time came.

…And gods knew what else. Sunny simply did not know the extent of preparations the Mad Prince had undertaken to ensure that, in this cycle, the events of the Nightmare went exactly as he planned.

The reality of the Great River had already been entirely changed from how it had originally been by the existence of the Six Plagues. And the vile madman manipulated it even more, purposefully setting the stage for his future self.

And then, when all the preparations were done, he simply entered the Source and ceased to exist, transferring the Estuary Key to Sunny.

Ensuring that he would not be poisoned by the Defilement immediately after entering the Nightmare, unlike how it had happened in the previous cycles.

And here they were.

Sunny let out a long sigh.

'That treacherous madman…'

Chapter-1490: No Bounds

Truly, a treachery that knew no bounds. Sunny had succumbed to the Defilement and betrayed the cohort, only to betray them once again once they were made into the Six Plagues by him. Killing one of his masters in the process and weaving countless schemes to destroy the other.

He... did not really know how to feel about it. Was he supposed to be proud of or appalled by his former self?

'I might... have to stop resenting the Spell for calling me that.'

In any case, he felt a deep sense of regret.

Because he wouldn't be able to strangle the mad bastard with his own two hands.

Sunny sighed.

Well, there it was. The truth.

Of course, there were still many things that made little sense, or no sense at all. The most obvious of them, of course, was the paradoxical existence of the Six Plagues, who had not only traveled to the distant past of the River Civilization, but also lingered in the Tomb of Ariel despite the start of a new cycle.

'They really broke all the rules.'

Sunny also did not know where the Mad Prince had found the Chain Breaker before arranging for it to be discovered by him and Nephis. He also did not know why the vile madman destroyed Weave, denying them the support of the Followers of Weaver, and many other things.

Some of them, he was probably never going to learn.

But it was alright.

The Tomb of Ariel had never been a place that could be fully understood by a mere mortal. And he already knew the general shape of things.

'So what?'

That knowledge, really… did not change anything at all.

Their goal remained the same. Travel to Twilight, retrieve Kai and Mordret… then gather whatever strength they can and attack Verge to slay the First Seeker. If anything, that goal had only become less impossible to achieve.

Not only were three of the Six Plagues already off the board, but there was no telling what else the Mad Prince had arranged to help the cohort conquer the Nightmare. Were the rest of the Plagues even alive? Perhaps he had already dealt with them, the same way he had dealt with Devouring Beast and Undying Slaughter.

'What is this weird feeling… it is as if I'm being helped by myself, from beyond the grave — and not only that, but that dead version of me is also a truly dreadful Nightmare Creature.'

Had a more bizarre sentence ever been spoken?

Although, technically, Sunny did not speak it aloud. And the Mad Prince was not technically dead… just erased from existence by traveling back in time.

'Yeah, that definitely does not sound just as bizarre.'

At that moment, Sunny realized that he had been kneeling on the deck of the Chain Breaker for quite some time, staring at the distant Great River and spacing out. It must have been quite a strange sight…

Before he could look around, however, a shadow fell on him. Raising his head, Sunny saw the Sin of Solace, who was looking at him with a

dark expression.

"Fool... are you done acting like an idiot? Oh, wow. Judging by your stupid expression, that idiot brain of yours finally managed to digest some information. Pathetic. How long has it taken you to realize something that should have been apparent on day one?"

Sunny stared at the sword wraith, then smiled darkly.

"You know… I know. You rotten bastard. How many times have you poisoned me with the Defilement?"

Indeed, the Sin of Solace was the reason Sunny had become the Mad Prince. But, strangely enough, the sword wraith was also the reason why the Mad Prince had managed to preserve a shred of lucidity. Keeping him forever torn between two mutually exclusive states... and, therefore, forever in agony.

How sinister.

Sunny's eye twitched.

"Answer me, you piece of trash."

The Sin of Solace stared at him, fury burning in his eyes. He clearly wanted to say something… but he couldn't.

The Estuary Key forbade him.

Not only that, but it also prevented the innate connection that Sunny shared with the splintered piece of his mind from serving as a conduit for subconscious knowledge about the previous cycles of the Great River and the secrets of the Estuary.

And, on top of that, that Memory was the first one Sunny had ever seen that functioned even without being summoned. Its passive enchantment was in effect despite the Estuary Key resting within his soul, both silencing the sword wraith and preventing time from influencing the jagged piece of black rock.

'Amazing.'

Just how skilled of a sorcerer had he become after countless years of being a Corrupted Titan?

Sunny sighed.

It did not matter. The cost was much too high.

It was unbearable.

Nevertheless, the Key of the Estuary was a promise of what he could potentially achieve, one day.

'Right. The others might be concerned about me suddenly going catatonic.'

Or maybe, they were petrified by dire revelations of their own.

Looking back, Sunny saw the members of the cohort.

Cassie was staring at the distant ribbon of the Great River, her expression distant. She must have realized the same things Sunny had… perhaps even more. Nephis was even more expressionless than usual. She seemed to have grasped the truth, as well.

Jet and Effie, however, knew less about the Tomb of Ariel. It did not appear that they were interested in the sight of the Great River at all. Instead, they were on the opposite side of the Chain Breaker, staring into the darkness beyond.

By then, the inertia carrying the flying ship forward had mostly dissipated. They were slowing down.

Nephis sighed.

"So that is what the vortex is."

Sunny glanced at her in confusion.

"What?"

She pointed at the Great River.

"It's flat. Although its shape makes it so that the entirety of the river

is one plane, there are actually two sides to it. The tunnel we traveled through is simply a passage that connects one side to the other. In other words, we did not descend to the bottom of the Great River. We simply passed through it, emerging from the other side."

And at some point, they were catapulted out of the vortex at such a tremendous speed that the Chain Breaker soared high above the surface of the river.

How long was it going to take them to come back?

Sunny winced.

'We don't even know how long we spent on Aletheia's Island. Months could have passed… years, even… before I became aware of the loop.'

Was Kai doing fine?

What about Fallen Grace? How were that brat Cronos and its other residents fairing?

'We need to return as soon as possible.'

There was also Effie and her baby. Sunny did not know what would happen if she gave birth within the Seed. Would the baby, who had been conceived in the waking world, be a Riverborn or an Outsider? What would happen to it after they conquered the Nightmare?

'Children are resilient…'

There was a reason why the Spell infected young people. Young souls were much more malleable, and could withstand the Awakening better. Of course, no infant had ever been sent into the First Nightmare, so there was no telling what would happen.

This was not a First Nightmare, either. It was the Third.

If they conquered it…

Would Effie's child become a Saint as an infant? Or would the child's soul collapse under the strain of Transcendence?

Sunny did not know.

'Damnation…'

He remained silent for a while, then shook his head.

'It's going to be fine. I refuse to believe that it won't.'

Just as he thought that, Effie suddenly cursed.

In the next moment, Jet yelled:

"Stop this damned ship right now!"

Chapter-1491: Dark Boundary

"Sunny, the sails!"

Before Jet's shout even faded, Cassie and Sunny were already moving. He called upon the shadows to raise the sails of the Chain Breaker, while she rushed to the runic circle. Nephis turned to look into the darkness, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword.

'What kind of disaster have we stumbled into now…'

Grasping the steering oars, Cassie skillfully turned the ship to borrow the force of the wind. At the same time, the runic circle ignited, absorbing strands of her essence — now that the enchantment circuits were repaired, it was not to power the sorcery of the ancient vessel, but simply to control it.

Finally, the Chain Breaker came to a halt, hovering in the boundless darkness of the Tomb of Ariel.

Sunny approached Jet and Effie, tracing their gazes into the distance.

"What is the… matter…"

His voice faltered.

Out there, far away…

The world ended.

It was hard to see, even for Sunny, because the end of the world was perfectly black, barely distinguishable from the darkness that surrounded them. But still… there was a vast, seemingly endless surface in front of them, stretching in all directions as far as the eye could see, like a boundary of the world.

Smooth and lusterless, like polished stone.

It took him a moment to realize what he was looking at.

'It's the… inner wall of the pyramid.'

The endless black boundary was just that… the wall of Ariel's Tomb, seen from the inside. However, it dwarfed anything he had ever seen. The towering walls of the Dark City were like a speck of dust in front of it. The great ramparts of Falcon Scott were like sand.

Looking at the endless black wall, Sunny was stunned by its sheer magnitude. For a moment, he wondered… was the interior of the pyramid truly large enough to encompass an entire realm, or was it him who had been reduced to the size of an ant?

Well, in any case… Jet's warning had come in time. The Chain Breaker was not going to crash into the endless wall of black stone anymore. They had already stopped, and there was plenty of distance between them and the boundary of Ariel's dreadful world.

But then, a slight frown appeared on his face.

Turning to Jet, Sunny remained silent for a moment.

He could see the surface of the wall because of how special his sight was. She, however, did not share his ability to see in the darkness.

So how had Jet and Effie known to warn them?

"What is it?"

The huntress was looking forward with a somber expression. She remained silent for a moment, then grimaced:

"Can't you smell it? It reeks of Nightmare Creatures."

Sunny slowly shook his head and glanced at Jet, raising an eyebrow.

Her icy blue eyes were radiating a chilling cold.

"There are souls… powerful souls, far ahead."

Soul Reaper was usually easygoing and relaxed, but now, her

expression was grave. Seeing it, Sunny felt a shiver run down his spine.

His frown deepened.

'Jet wouldn't be wary of just any soul. What kind of power…'

Cursing inwardly, he turned to the distant black boundary and strained his eyes, trying to discern something… anything… to understand what was threatening them.

Knowing that Sunny had the best chance of discovering the hidden threat, the rest of the cohort fell silent.

'What is it… I can't see anything…'

Now that his initial shock of witnessing the inner wall of the Tomb had subsided, Sunny could study it in more detail… not that there was a lot to study. It was just a solid black surface, stretching endlessly into the darkness. He was too far away to notice anything else.

Well… if there was one thing, it was that the wall was not smooth, as he had initially thought. Rather, it was uneven, as if covered in countless ridges and bumps. Those ridges and bumps looked tiny from afar, but they should be dozens, if not hundreds, of meters across.

Sunny peered at the irregularities, thinking.

'There might be something hiding in the seams. Maybe there are caves in the stone? I don't see any entrances, though…'

Then, he suddenly froze.

Out there on the wall of the black pyramid, something had just moved.

The movement was tiny and at the very periphery of his vision, so if Sunny had not been looking at the wall of Ariel's Tomb intently, he would not have noticed it.

Turning his head slightly, he stared at a particular spot. What was it? He still couldn't see any creatures hiding in the recess between the strange, irregular ridges.

Then, his perception shifted slightly. It was just a mundane shift, like concentrating on a near object instead of a distant one, as well as a mental one, like trying to perceive something as a part of a whole instead of a separate entity.

It was at this moment that Sunny's hair stood on end, and his face became as pale as that of a ghost.

Instantly petrified, he swayed slightly.

'D—damnation!'

Powerful souls…

There was nothing hiding in the recesses of the endless wall. There were no caves hidden between the bumps and ridges where dreadful abominations could dwell.

...Instead, the entire surface of the wall was covered by abominations, who clung to it like moths.

The bumps and ridges… were the edges of millions of black wings.

The inner wall of Ariel's Tomb was obscured by a colossal swarm of numerous Dark Butterflies. There were myriads of these eerie Great Monsters resting on the endless black surface, seemingly asleep…

But also ready to awaken if anything disturbed their slumber.

Sunny took an involuntary step back.

'This… this is the place Song and Valor wanted to conquer?'

One Great Monster was a calamity that only a few people in the waking world could quell. But there were countless Dark Butterflies dwelling inside the black pyramid… protecting its boundary… waiting for some fool to set them free.

Or maybe waiting to destroy anyone who would try to desecrate the tomb that the Demon of Dread had built.

Sunny shuddered.

'Ariel… that lunatic… just what did he build? And why?'

Turning his head slowly, he looked at Cassie with hollow eyes and asked quietly:

"Cassie… can you extinguish the radiance of the sacred tree?"

She seemed confused for a moment, then nodded. In the next moment, the beautiful light of the rustling tree grew dimmer, eventually disappearing entirely.

Sunny let out a shaky sigh.

The lanterns illuminating the Chain Breaker were extinguished, as well. Soon, the members of the cohort found themselves in absolute darkness.

Only Sunny and Cassie could move freely in the absence of light.

Unable to look away from the harrowing sight of countless black butterflies crowding the surface of the endless stone wall, he calmed his wildly beating heart and said in a hoarse whisper:

"Cassie, take us away from here. Back to the River… fast. As fast as you can!"

The Chain Breaker moved, slowly turning its bow. The creaking of the masts, the rustle of leaves, and the ripple of the billowing sails sounded like thunder to his ears.

'If they notice us… we die. I have survived many situations in which I had no business surviving. But this one… there's no surviving that.'

They had to get away.

Sunny gritted his teeth and waited.

A few moments passed, then a few moments more.

A minute.

The Chain Breaker was gliding toward the distant Great River, steadily gaining speed.

'Faster, faster…'

Sunny never expected that he would be praying to return to the Great River one day. But here he was, doing just that.

…Perhaps someone had heard his prayers.

Eventually, the dreadful wall of Ariel's Tomb disappeared from view, and the beautiful ribbon of the Great River drew closer.

Chapter-1492: Back to the River

The Chain Breaker escaped from the slumbering legion of the monstrous butterflies, traveling further and further away from the endless black surface of the pyramid's wall. Sunny counted the seconds, afraid that a dark cloud would rise into the air and chase them.

Tense silence permeated the air, and none of the cohort members spoke.

Powerful winds wandered the hollow darkness around them. The space itself was acting strangely, making it feel as if the world was not quite right. The distant ribbon of the Great River was drawing nearer at tremendous speed.

After a while, he took a deep breath.

'We should be safe now… right?'

He wasn't sure. Sunny had thought that he knew a lot about the Tomb of Ariel, but now, he felt that the unassuming daemon was far more sinister and mysterious than it seemed.

And why wouldn't he have been? Ariel did not leave that strong of an impression, true, but that was only in comparison to his three harrowing siblings — Weaver, Nether, and Hope. The Demon of Dread was still a true deity, though… a being capable of challenging the gods and tearing down the heavens.

Of course, this pyramid of his would be just as dreadful. In fact, it was a testament to how adaptable people were that Sunny had learned to take this terrible place for granted — a tomb built from the body of an Unholy Titan, containing a mystical river created from the Titan's blood.

Was he insane to hope that they could escape its boundary unscathed?

...But in the end, they did escape. None of the Dark Butterflies had awakened or rushed to pursue them, allowing the Chain Breaker to freely dive into the darkness. The space itself rippled and flowed, streaming past the flying ship like liquid.

It was a strange feeling.

They were descending toward the Great River much faster than it should have been possible. Eventually, Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

"We are safe… I think."

Hearing him, Cassie allowed the sacred tree to shine once again, and its soft light enveloped the deck.

The members of the cohort glanced at each other, their faces full of weariness and fatigue. The last few days had not been easy on them… and the days before that had been even more dire.

Jet looked back with a bleak expression.

"What the hell was there, in the darkness?"

The others looked at Sunny, as well. He remained silent for a moment, then shrugged.

"The wall of the pyramid. And on that wall… countless Great Monsters, crowding its surface like horrid mold. Thankfully, they seemed to be slumbering, and none noticed us."

The members of the cohort were dismayed, and he could easily understand why. The words "countless" and "Great Monsters" were not supposed to ever appear next to each other. And yet, here in the Tomb of Ariel, they did.

'Seriously… now, I understand why there are only a few dozen Saints in the world.'

Surely, this particular Third Nightmare was more dreadful than the

rest. But not by much, most likely. Saint Tyris, Beastmaster, Bloodwave, Wake of Ruin, and the other Transcendents… all of them had survived harrowing trials similar to this one.

Sunny had never underestimated the Saints, but he found a new sense of admiration for them.

'No wonder most of them seem so… distant.'

Shaking his head, Sunny gazed at the Great River and let out a sigh.

"Anyway… I don't think that there is anyone between us and the river. So, we should be safe for now."

Without saying anything, they stood together in silence and looked at the colorful ribbon that floated in the darkness far, far away.

Eventually, Nephis spoke:

"Then, we need to decide what to do next."

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The Chain Breaker hovered in the emptiness, illuminated by the soft radiance of the sacred tree. Saint stood guard on its bow, while Fiend crouched near the runic circle at its stern. A motionless figure in red garments could be seen under the glowing branches — it was the Echo of the sybil that Cassie had summoned, finally restored after sustaining severe damage on Aletheia's Island.

However, there were no humans in sight. All five of them were below the deck, sharing a meal.

They were too exhausted to come up with plans, but had no other choice. It was necessary to decide where to land, now that they were returning to the Great River.

After everyone had satiated themselves, there were a few minutes of silence. Eventually, Sunny spoke:

"Well… our primary goal remains the same. We need to find Kai and the other guy in Twilight. Hopefully, there will be other fighters

there to help us take on Verge."

Jet gave him a curious look.

"Other fighters? I thought that Twilight was destroyed."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"No one really knows what happened to Twilight. Technically, it was not destroyed… just lost. Whatever that means. We had the idea that there might be survivors there simply because, otherwise, this Nightmare seems to be impossible."

His expression dimmed.

"...That was before, though. Now, any preconceived notions we had about the Nightmare are meaningless. We don't even know if the remaining Plagues are still alive, or how many Defiled are left in Verge. Perhaps their power has dwindled enough for the Spell to decide that we can handle it all ourselves.

No, even that is an fundamentally false assumption, because the balance of forces within the Nightmare has been tampered with."

As he finished speaking, Cassie added:

"Our plan was to explore Wind Flower… Aletheia's Island… to find you two, then return to Fallen Grace, regroup, and sail for Twilight. However, the situation is a bit different now, because we can reach both cities from up here. We can even travel directly to Verge, not that it's a good idea."

Nephis nodded:

"So, what we need to decide today is whether we want to go directly to Twilight, or recuperate at Fallen Grace first."

Effie and Jet glanced at each other. Neither of them had been to Fallen Grace or knew a lot about Twilight. At the same time, due to the difference in how the members of the cohort had experienced time in the Nightmare, they were the most exhausted of the five.

Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had spent more time inside the Tomb of Ariel, but they at least had plenty of downtime between the many harrowing ordeals. Effie and Jet, however, never had an opportunity to rest.

After a few moments of silence, Effie smiled:

"What's the point of delaying the inevitable? Let's go directly to where Night and that Valor princeling are. Wait, or is he a Song princeling now? Anyway… the sooner we get them, the sooner we can escape this damned Nightmare."

Jet grinned.

"I agree. I consider myself a very patient woman, you know… I waited for a long, long time to get a chance at Transcendence. But now, my patience is running thin. Let's conquer this Nightmare as soon as possible."

She secretly threw a glance at Effie's belly, but did not add anything else.

Sunny sighed.

"Well, then…"

He looked at Nephis, remained silent for a moment, and nodded.

"It's unanimous. We are going to Twilight, I guess."

Chapter-1493: Sins of the Past

The plan of action was clear. In the next… however long it was going to take, the Chain Breaker would traverse the empty darkness and return to the Great River. They would aim to land as close to Twilight as possible.

Granted, no one knew where the lost city was located, exactly. All they knew was that it was situated in the reaches of the Great River where the sky was painted lilac by the light of dawn, as well as the general era when it had been established — the latter was inscribed on the slates recovered from the drowned temple.

So, Cassie was going to guide the Chain Breaker to the stretch of the River corresponding to that era, and they would explore the currents from there.

Sunny felt a bad premonition when he thought about Twilight, and the blind girl seemed troubled, as well. Neither knew what was waiting for the cohort there… but, whatever it was, two things were certain.

First, that they were going to face a trial no less dangerous, and most likely far more terrible, than anything they had experienced in the Tomb of Ariel yet… which was saying a lot, considering how utterly dreadful Aletheia's Island had been.

Second, that the Mad Prince had to have arranged something to happen in Twilight, as well.

There were four fixed events in each cycle, after all — Nephis and Sunny entering the Tomb of Ariel in the far reaches of the future, upstream of Weave, Cassie entering the Nightmare in Fallen Grace, Effie and Jet entering the Nightmare among the River Nomads… and Kai entering the Nightmare somewhere near Twilight, accompanied by Mordret.

It would be strange if the Mad Prince had not included the lost city in his schemes.

'Something unspeakable is waiting for us there… I can feel it.'

Sunny's expression was bleak.

Nevertheless, he felt strangely hopeful. Precisely because the Mad Prince had most likely already done something to give them a chance, no matter how small. Was it arrogance, to have faith in the devious nature of his former self? He did not know, and he did not care.

Additionally, Sunny had two more hidden advantages. The Crown of Twilight he wore was going to grant him a nearly inexhaustible reserve of essence in the land — well, waters — of constant dawn. More than that, it was a key to the defensive arrays of Twilight. All he had to do to gain control of them was reach Daeron's throne room.

He and Nephis were two of the most powerful Masters in history, and their power only became greater when they were together. Jet received her Aspect Legacy, while Effie could inspire all three of them with her Ascended Ability and support the cohort from the back with javelins.

There was Cassie, as well… the unassuming seer who was actually the hidden ace of the cohort. Her affinity to mysteries and revelations could resolve many problems that would otherwise be unsolvable, and warn them of the most dire threats in advance.

So, overall, he judged that their chances of tackling Twilight were not bad.

Right now, however…

Sunny hid his face behind a cup of tea and furtively studied the faces of his companions.

There was another conversation they had to have.

He sighed.

'This is silly…'

They had not discussed the revelations about the nature of the Great River, the true identity of the Six Plagues, and his own role in all that had happened yet.

It was indeed stupid, to feel ashamed of the actions of his Defiled past version… but he was. How did one go about telling his friends that he had turned them all into Nightmare Creatures in the past life?

Or maybe even in countless past lives?

'It is probably… just as awkward as telling the girl you're in love with that you killed her.'

Sunny coughed.

'But then again, adding that your evil version betrayed the other Defiled and brutally slaughtered countless innocent people just to create a future where she remains alive… should count for something, right? I mean… it's a bit romantic. Right?'

He suppressed the desire to groan and looked away.

What was this insanity? Who else had a life as unhinged as his?

Eventually, Sunny sighed.

"Now, let's talk about the Great River itself. You should have realized something after seeing it from afar. I realized a few things, as well… and they might very well affect how this Nightmare ends."

Trying to keep his voice neutral, Sunny shared what he had deduced. The cyclical nature of the Great River, the existence of the Source and how the past and the future were connected through it, the fact that it wasn't their first time challenging the Nightmare, the commonalities between the great loop of the River and the artificial loop of Aletheia's Island…

Among those commonalities was his ability to slowly become aware of the repeating nature of time, which led to his eventual Defilement — and, therefore, to the Defilement of the rest of the cohort and

Neph's death.

Lastly, Sunny explained why he thought that the Mad Prince was gone, and how the influence of his demented predecessor was still affecting everything that was happening on the Great River, and in particular to them.

He did, however, keep a few things to himself… for example, the fact that the vile madman had been enslaved by the Dread Lord.

As well as why the Mad Prince had been so obsessed with rewriting the past.

In the end, Sunny took a deep breath and said, his voice a bit stifled:

"So, uh… sorry, I guess. You know, for creating the Six Plagues."

The other members of the cohort stared at him silently for a while. He winced.

'You can at least say something, damn it…'

At that moment, Jet chuckled.

"What are you apologizing for? It's not your fault. You and I both watched over people who failed their First Nightmare and became Nightmare Creatures… so, you should know better than most that the person is not to be blamed for what the abomination does."

Effie looked at him with a mischievous smile.

"Right. But, since we're apologizing for what our evil twins did, sorry for squishing you like a bug. A very small, teeny-tiny… squishy bug. That's what Devouring Beast did, right? Should I feel guilty about it, as well?"

Nephis shook her head.

"We don't know what happened during our first cycle in the Nightmare, and how you ended up entering the Source. Perhaps the rest of us were already dead, by then… so, you might have saved us all, to begin with. The only thing that matters is what happens in this

cycle. And making it the last."

Cassie didn't say anything, and simply nodded.

Sunny sighed.

He didn't really feel responsible for the actions of the Mad Prince, but it was still nice, to know that his companions had his back… no matter what.

At that moment, Effie leaned back and said:

"On that note, doofus… can you tell your chest to stop trying to bite my arm off? I know there are still plenty of tasty things inside! I won't take much… well, not all of it, at least…"

He laughed.

"Go get your own tasty things. Do you think we don't see you wolfing down those berries from your locket without sharing them with anyone?"

As the members of the cohort moved past the identity of the Mad Prince and started to discuss the bizarre secrets of the Great River, his gaze brushed past Cassie. The blind girl was listening quietly, cradling a cup of tea in her hands.

For a moment, a shadow ran across Sunny's face.

He had become aware of the loop on Aletheia's Island… but hadn't Cassie become aware of it, too?

Wouldn't the same had happened with the cycles of the Great River, then?

...And, unlike him, she didn't have the Estuary Key to prevent her from remembering.

Sunny studied the blind girl for a moment, then shook his head.

No, that was impossible.

Back on Aletheia's Island, Cassie must have regained her Memories because of being exposed to the Sin of Solace through him… even if she had never admitted it. So, the restriction placed on the sword wraith was protecting her, too.

Otherwise, it would be not Cassie, but Torment sitting across the table from him.

Watching as the blind girl took a sip of her tea, and then smiled at Effie's joke, he finally allowed himself to relax.

There was little time left for them to rest and recuperate.

Once the Chain Breaker reached Twilight… Sunny had a feeling that none of them would have an opportunity to rest for a long while.

Chapter-1494: The Edge

Standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker as it barreled through the empty darkness, Sunny felt a strange mix of horror and exhilaration. That was because the distance they had to cover could only be called… cosmic.

He did not know how far the Great River was from the walls of the pyramid, exactly, but it had to be an astronomical number of kilometers — perhaps not as immense as the distance between Earth and the Moon, but of a similar proportion.

If so, logically, it would take them years to return… however, space itself was acting strange in the interior of the Tomb of Ariel. Judging by how fast the Great River was drawing closer, they were going to reach it in a matter of days, or weeks at most.

In any case, it didn't stop Sunny from imagining that he was on a spaceship.

'Come to think of it… can the Chain Breaker travel through space?'

It probably could, considering that the force propelling the flying vessel was sorcerous in nature. However, that didn't mean that the helmsman and the passengers would survive space. So, this was probably as close as Sunny would ever get to being a taikonaut… a cosmonaut? Astronaut? Whatever the word was.

Not the least because, according to Jet, Earth's orbit hid dangers that even she wasn't qualified to know about.

With a sigh, he looked away from the Great River and went to sit beneath the branches of the sacred tree. He preferred to spend his time leaning on Ananke's ketch, but the Sin of Solace was less likely to bother him here. Therefore, Sunny reluctantly abandoned his previous spot.

With only a few precious days left before they returned, he wanted to concentrate on weaving. There were five Supreme soul shards inside the Covetous Coffer, and Sunny still remembered his sincere desire to make the cohort as strong as possible.

Sadly, even after studying the soul arsenals of his companions, he didn't find a Memory that could be easily elevated to the Supreme Rank. There were a number of Transcendent Memories between the five of them, but very few that were both suitable and within his ability to modify.

The only real exception was the Sin of Solace. Sunny felt that he could elevate the Rank of the cursed jian rather swiftly… however, he was wary of making it any stronger.

Before, Sunny had only been concerned about making the sword wraith more powerful. Now, he also had to worry about the relationship between the Sin of Solace and the Estuary Key.

The Sin of Solace was a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, while the Estuary Key was a Supreme Memory of the Sixth Tier. Was it really a coincidence that the Key was exactly one Rank and one Tier above the Memory it was meant to suppress?

If not, what would happen if this balance was broken by his meddling?

Considering that the consequence of failure was becoming infected by the Defilement, Sunny did not wish to take unnecessary risks. The jade jian was already capable of cutting through Great Nightmare Creatures with the help of the Crown of Dawn, anyway.

So, Sunny was forced to leave the Supreme soul shards to gather dust in the Covetous Coffer, and turned his attention to the Covetous Coffer itself, instead.

He was still researching a way to turn this unique Memory of his into half of an Echo, which would most likely allow him to make a perfectly fine Shadow.

Why would he want to turn the Covetous Coffer into a Shadow?

Well, for one… both the storage space, the physical size, and the flexibility of what the Coffer could be turned into depended on the potency of Sunny's soul. The peculiar Memory was already far greater than the small, toothy box it had been once. If Sunny became a Transcendent Terror, who knew what form the Coffer would be able to assume?

Apart from that, even after all these years and the countless horrors Sunny had experienced during them, he still remembered the Mordant Mimic as one of the most vile and troublesome creatures he had ever killed. Plus, the bastard had once belonged to Noctis, and could produce soul coins.

Who wouldn't want to have a Shadow like that?

Entertaining himself with such thoughts, Sunny spent a few days blissfully pouring over his plans to create an artificial Echo — no matter how dysfunctional.

They were getting closer and closer to the Great River.

The distant ribbon slowly grew larger. Soon, it was already covering half of the horizon. The seven tiny motes of lights turned into furiously radiant spheres, painting the bow of the Chain Breaker with stark light.

Then, the Great River completely obscured the darkness beyond.

At that point, they were not blindly flying forward, but instead aiming for a particular stretch of it. The winds surrounding them were growing stronger, and the light of the seven suns suffused the air, making it seem as though they were sailing through the sky once again.

Finally, after slightly more than a week, they reached the Edge.

Sunny knew that they had arrived because a flood of essence suddenly entered his soul. Of course, in reality, it was not coming from an outside source — rather, it was the innate replenishment rate of his cores that had been enhanced by the Crown of Twilight.

In any case, the Crown had recognized dawn, and so, its mystical

enchantment activated.

Sighing, Sunny left what he was doing and climbed to the upper deck.

There, the members of the cohort had already gathered, looking forward.

There, in front of them…

A colossal waterfall was plummeting into the abyss, stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see. Painted in the hues of beautiful pink and lilac by the pale light of dawn, the dreamlike clouds of water vapor flowed into the darkness, sparkling with reflected sunlight.

The distant roar of the impossible waterfall was like a soft whisper, for now.

It was an incredibly beautiful sight.

Stunned by the magical beauty, Sunny let out a quiet sigh.

'...Why must this dreadful place be so breathtaking?'

With that, he glanced at Cassie, who was holding the steering oars.

Guided by her hands, the Chain Breaker soared above the waterfall, flew above the water for a few hours more, and finally landed on the surface of the Great River.

They had returned.

Chapter-1495: Still Water

Sunny had begun the Nightmare under the pure azure sky. Then, he traveled to Fallen Grace, which was bathed in the crimson light of an eternal sunset. Now, he finally reached the waters where the soft twilight of nascent dawn suffused the world with a gentle glow.

The flowing waters of the Great River were like a calm mirror that reflected the dreamlike palette of the vibrant morning sky. As such, it seemed as though the graceful vessel was sailing on heaven itself.

It was a beautiful sight that soothed the soul and took one's breath away… if not for the dangers that lurked beneath the splendor of the wondrous current.

Cassie had long used the Guiding Light to point the way to Kai... the fact that the sacred staff still responded to his True Name filled Sunny's heart with hope. It meant that his friend was still alive, at least.

Now, they were traveling downstream in search of the lost city of Twilight, where the charming archer was stranded. The problem was that instead of distancing itself from the Edge, the Chain Breaker was instead drawing closer and closer to it.

So, they had to be wary not only of the Nightmare Creatures hiding beneath the waves, but also of the current itself.

The closer they were to the Edge, the more violent the currents became, trying to pull the ship into the endless waterfall. Even now, a few days of sailing away from it, it was almost impossible to keep the Chain Breaker on course. In the end, Cassie had given up on struggling against the current and raised the flying ship into the air.

They were staying low to the water, flying along its surface, to avoid being attacked from above — or at least have more time to react if an

attack came.

Of course, such a strategy also left them more vulnerable to the enemies lurking below the water. But after witnessing the dreadful swarm of monstrous butterflies, Sunny was extremely wary of the boundless expanse of the dim sky.

Days slowly passed.

Sunny continued to advance in his endeavor to turn the Covetous Coffer into an Echo. Gradually, though, his mind drifted away from that riddle, turning somber and grave.

His companions wore similar expressions.

It was as though they were sensing the approach of a violent storm… a storm of blood, perhaps. Of a battle that was going to test the very essence of their resolve, and maybe find it lacking.

Slowly but surely, the idle conversations ceased. The sounds of laughter that used to echo above the deck of the Chain Breaker disappeared, replaced by grim silence. An oppressive tension settled on the deck of the graceful vessel.

Nevertheless, everyone remained calm and collected, preparing for battle with cold determination.

'Ah. I can smell it…'

The blood was yet to spill, but its scent had already permeated the air.

Strangely enough, very few Nightmare Creatures attacked their ship — perhaps because even abominations struggled to stay alive this close to the Edge. As the days went by, however, their numbers dwindled even further, until none remained at all.

That was definitely both strange and worrisome. No place in the Tomb of Ariel was supposed to be safe, and since even Nightmare Creatures were reluctant to venture into these waters, humans like them had to be wary, as well.

…On the seventh day, they finally saw something rising from above the surface of the river. As the Chain Breaker drew closer, and they could see the massive object more clearly, Sunny frowned.

It was the carcass of an abominable leviathan, its body covered by a pale carapace. The flesh of the Nightmare Creature had long rotten away, leaving behind only an empty husk. A forest of arrows was rising from the cracked shell, and there were broken harpoons floating in the water around it.

There were gaping holes littering the carapace, as well, as if someone had torn through it with sharp teeth, ripping out huge chunks of flesh in the process.

Sunny thought that he recognized the marks left behind by those monstrous fangs.

'...Did Daeron kill this abomination?'

It would make sense, considering that they were close to his city. There was something eerie about the dead Nightmare Creature, though…

'Why is it still here?'

This close to the Edge, a powerful current pulled everything into the abyss. Judging by the look of the carcass, the abomination had been slain countless years ago. And yet, it still remained, somehow floating in place. Even the broken harpoons surrounding it had not been carried away by the water.

As he frowned, Nephis spoke to Cassie, her voice carrying a hint of unease:

"Don't approach."

The blind seer gently pushed the steering oar, sending the Chain Breaker around the massive carcass.

Jet studied it silently for a few moments, then asked:

"What do you think happened here?"

Sunny pursed his lips.

"It must have been killed by the Twilight people, before the city was lost. I am not sure why it remains in this strange state, though."

They were going to find out sooner or later.

Leaving the troubling carcass behind, they continued to follow the Guiding Light.

It wasn't long before they encountered more signs of the past battle.

There were more dead Nightmare Creatures, each more terrifying than the previous one. All kinds of horrors seemed to have attacked Twilight once, a long time ago, only to be slain by the warriors of Daeron's city. And these were only the ones who had resisted the pull of the current, for some reason. Who knew how many dreadful abominations really participated in the harrowing siege?

The corpses were littered with all kinds of wounds. Some had been delivered by crafted weapons, some were clearly delivered by powerful Memories. Some seemed to have been dealt to the Nightmare Creatures by the Serpent King himself, or perhaps one of the Saints in his service.

They also saw fields of flotsam left behind by shattered ships. The sight of floating debris was both sorrowful and ominous.

After traveling across the ancient battlefield for several days, they saw relatively intact ships, as well.

They were different both from the alloy behemoths of the waking world and the graceful wooden ships of the River People. Their frames were built of wood, but the hulls were plated with armor crafted from bone, shell, and hide from corrupted leviathans.

Most were severely damaged, tilted, with gaping breaches in their hulls. Their masts were broken, and the plates of armor covering their sides bore terrible scars. Some were scorched, some seemed to have been partially dissolved by some unknown liquid. In other words… these broken ships looked no different from the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures their crew had fought against.

Dead, abandoned, and forgotten.

If there was one thing in common between all of them, though, it was that there was not a living soul aboard. Only bones wearing shredded armor. Everything was dead and silent… even the waters of the Great River grew strangely still, the current almost disappearing.

Watching the current stop made Sunny feel a deep sense of unease. He had seen the ceaseless flow of the Great River halt only once… all those months ago, in the eye of the time storm. Witnessing something similar happening near Twilight made Sunny wary.

'Just what the hell happened here?'

Chapter-1496: Bygone Battlefield

They traversed the old battlefield for several more days. By the end of the second week, there were so many dead Nightmare Creatures and ghostly ships floating in the still water, surrounded by debris and broken weapons, that it became almost impossible to navigate between them. A strange haze hung in the air, limiting how far they could see.

With no other choice, Cassie raised the Chain Breaker higher, and they flew above the scene of harrowing slaughter.

The Great River was littered with rotten husks of massive abominations, debris, and shattered ships. Shrouded in the somber twilight, they covered the water like a horrid carpet. That carpet stretched into the distance, eventually disappearing in the haze.

Sunny was appalled and shaken by this sight.

'How many people died here?'

He was no stranger to battlefields, but this one seemed especially somber and poignant.

Although there were much less broken ships than there were slain Nightmare Creatures, this section of the watery battlefield alone must have taken the lives of countless warriors of Twilight. Not all of them had been Ascended, after all… desperate to escape a dying world and create an army of Saints to reclaim it, Daeron had led most of his surviving subjects here, both Awakened and mundane.

Before the fall, they had been truly numerous.

"What is this place?"

Effie's voice was low.

Nephis glanced at her, then looked back at the dreadful scene.

"...It's the outskirts of a battlefield. This is where our predecessors, warriors of the Twilight Sea, faced the Defiled legion of Verge."

The Serpent King had once led his people to besiege the cursed city of Verge, but was forced to retreat after failing to destroy the First Seeker. The forces of the Defilement must have launched a war campaign in retaliation, and this was the morbid result.

Sunny studied the floating corpses.

'No wonder the Defiled have been slow in obliterating Fallen Grace.'

The Six Plagues and their tainted army might have been the victors of the siege of Twilight, but the casualties they had sustained were immeasurably severe. Verge did not possess an infinite number of soldiers, after all. With how many of the Defiled abominations seemed to have perished here, in the haze of dawn, there would not be enough of them left to continue an aggressive conquest.

'Was it different during the first cycle? I wonder…'

Perhaps, without the Six Plagues, Twilight would still be standing. Same for Weave, and some of the cities ruled by the sybils. The cohort would have been able to travel across the Great River, slowly gathering allies and building a vast army to destroy Verge.

Sunny and Nephis would have obtained the support of the Followers of Weaver, Cassie would have become the saint of the River People, Jet and Effie would have gathered the tribes of the River Nomads, and Kai would have earned the trust of the king of Twilight with Mordret's help.

…But maybe not. Maybe Twilight had always been destined to fall before the new challengers arrived, and the Serpent King had always been destined to descend into madness and become a mindless beast.

In any case, that past was gone now, and there was no way to uncover its secrets.

Instead, Sunny had to carry the weight of King Daeron's crown, and of Wind Flower's trust, to finish what the people of the Twilight Sea had started.

He gritted his teeth.

'I'll use your gifts well.'

"Let's proceed."

Guided by the light of the sacred relic of the sybils, the Chain Breaker flew above the carpet of dreadful corpses, the broken ships, and the forests of broken weapons.

The Edge was drawing closer and closer. They could not see far because of the haze, but the wind brought with it distant whispers — the endless waterfall was not that far, by now.

Cassie had lowered the speed of the flying ship to a crawl, afraid that something would unexpectedly attack them from below. This way, at least, they would notice an approaching threat in advance.

Sunny was peering into the distance when a swift shadow suddenly fell from the sky, and a black crow landed on Jet's shoulder. Her Echo had been scouting ahead, and seemed to have brought news.

Soul Reaper looked at Crow Crow and raised an eyebrow.

"What did you find?"

The crow opened its wings and cawed:

"Shai-nee! Shai-nee!"

Jet frowned.

"Shiny? You found something shiny?"

The Echo stared at her for a couple of moments, then clicked its beak and flew into the air again. Jet glanced at Cassie.

"We should probably follow."

The blind girl hesitated for a bit, then moved the oar, leading the Chain Breaker away from the direction where the Guiding Light was pointing.

They continued to fly in the direction which used to be downstream, at the same time moving closer to the Edge. After some time, a towering edifice revealed itself from the haze.

Unlike the carcasses of the leviathans, the structure was clearly made by human hands. A mighty wall rose high above the water, crowned with battlements. The base of the wall was littered with massive spikes, as if to prevent the Nightmare Creatures from reaching it. There were plenty of dead abominations impaled on these spikes.

Several enormous chains stretched into the distance from both sides of the structure, disappearing into the haze.

It was a floating fortress.

Sunny studied the fortress, impressed by how imposing it looked in the dim twilight of the early dawn.

However…

For every spike that remained whole, more were bent or broken. Most of the massive chains that had been connected to the sides of the fortress once were torn and covered by rust. The mighty walls were breached and had partially collapsed.

The battlements were littered with human bones, with tattered flags hanging lifelessly in the forlorn stillness.

The ghost fortress stood empty and conquered, and only the rare rattling of rusty chains broke the hollow silence that surrounded it.

Crow Crow was heading directly to the battlements.

Landing on the parapet of a partially collapsed bastion, the black bird raised its beak and cawed loudly. Its caws echoed above the water, spreading far and wide. Frowning slightly, Cassie brought the Chain Breaker to a halt.

The members of the cohort gathered on the bow, studying the breached fortress. The Guiding Light was still pointing away from it, so…

Why had Jet's crow brought them here?

Sunny was just about to speak when he noticed something from the corner of his eye. Out there, atop the collapsed bastion, something had just shined brightly.

Turning his head, he narrowed his eyes with a frown.

'What is it?'

A moment later, there was a bright shine again, but it disappeared almost immediately.

'There…'

There was a skeletal corpse in polished steel armor laying on the battlement, its back leaning against the locking mechanism of one of the chains. As the chain swayed in the water, the corpse was pushed lightly up and down. When it moved, soft sunlight reflected from the polished surface of its breastplate… almost as if inviting them to come.

Sunny tilted his head.

'That armor…'

It was mostly covered in grime, but some of it was clean, revealing lustrous, polished steel.

That steel was so perfectly polished, in fact, that it was almost like a…

'Mirror.'

He took a deep breath.

...It seemed that Mordret, the Prince of Nothing, was welcoming them to Twilight.

Chapter-1497: Chain Barrier

The Chain Breaker rose higher, eventually cresting the wall of the floating stronghold and coming to a stop above the ramparts. From there, they could see a bit further into the haze.

Far away to their left, another floating fortress could barely be seen in the dim twilight, just as battered and forlorn as this one. There was one more to their right. All three had been connected by thick chains once, but those had long been torn.

Sunny remained motionless for a moment.

'...It's a barrier to block the Great River.'

There must have been a ring of these fortresses built around Twilight once, with massive chains strung between them both above and beneath the water. That way, the Defiled would have had to break through the chain barrier before reaching the city.

The other choice would have been to dive much deeper and bypass the fearsome barricade of floating fortresses altogether. But that would have left their backs wide open to retaliation by the garrisons of the vanguard strongholds… in any case, it was easy to see that the Defiled had chosen to assault the chain barrier directly.

The fighting seemed to have been especially harrowing in the vicinity of the fallen fortresses. And beyond them…

Sunny shivered.

On the other side of the breached stronghold, there were so many floating corpses that he could barely see the water. It was to such a degree that one could probably walk from here to Twilight without getting their boots wet once.

Frowning, he placed his hand on the railing.

Before he did, however, Sunny hesitated for a moment and looked at his companions.

Mordret…

The Prince of Nothing was their ally in this Nightmare — or at least, he was supposed to be. In truth, it was hard to predict what the devious bastard would do.

In the Second Nightmare, Mordret had slaughtered the entire population of the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Hope, all in pursuit of power. So, he was not someone who was going to have a problem with destroying the remains of the River Civilization to achieve his goals. Nor would he feel burdened by releasing the Defiled Saints into the waking world.

In other words, Mordret could have chosen to ally himself with the Six Plagues if he thought that their method of conquering the Nightmare was better.

However… Sunny was pretty sure that the Plagues needed to either kill or Defile every human in the Tomb of Ariel to win. And, no matter how odious, Mordret was still a human. Unless the Prince of Nothing was ready to surrender his soul to Corruption, his only way out of the Tomb was to destroy the First Seeker.

At least that was what Sunny hoped for… especially because Mordret was the only person who could teach them about Soul Stealer's Flaw, or at least use his knowledge of it to slay his past version.

Still…

Cassie was immune to Mordret's power due to being blind. Neph's Soul Sea was most likely just as dangerous as Sunny's — if Mordret tried to possess her, he would be incinerated in a radiant inferno of white flame. Jet's shattered soul could not be easily possessed, either, due to how unique her Aspect was.

But Effie had no defense against the Prince of Nothing. The anvil amulet forged by Mordret's father to protect people against his son

was with Kai — back in the Second Nightmare, the huntress had refused to take it in favor of the charming archer.

Of course, it wasn't a given that Mordret would be able to defeat Effie in a soul battle. But Sunny did not want to risk it.

After hesitating for a moment, he looked at the huntress and said:

"Can you stay and guard the ship?"

She frowned a little, but then nodded and forced out a smile.

"Sure. You guys go and have fun."

With that, she took a step back and leaned on her spear.

Sunny took Neph's hand and pulled her into the shadows. The two of them appeared on the battlements below a moment later, while Jet simply jumped down. Cassie glided down with the help of the Quiet Dancer and landed elegantly among the weathered corpses.

All around them were the skeletal remains of the warriors of Twilight. It was easy to see which had been Awakened once, and which had been mundane humans — the former were covered only by rotten fabric, their Memory armor long gone. The latter wore suits of armor crafted from the hides of Nightmare Creatures and sublime steel.

The corpse Sunny and his companions were looking for was nearby, resting against the locking mechanism of one of the siege chains.

They approached the dead man carefully. Soon, Sunny could see the four of them reflected in the polished breastplate of the dead man… a white skull stared at him eerily from above it, the empty pits of its eyes full of darkness.

Sunny had expected to see Mordret hiding in the reflection, but, to his surprise, there were only four figures there — Nephis, Cassie, Jet, and himself.

'Just what is that bastard planning?'

For a moment, he was even unsure if Mordret had anything to do with this place. Was it all a coincidence?

Then, however…

Suddenly, Sunny realized that he could not look away from his own reflection. He stared at it, feeling strangely drawn to the polished breastplate… as if an invisible force of attraction was pulling him in…

In the next moment, the world seemed to have flipped.

Everything remained the same, but also strangely... inverted. What was to his right was now to his left, while what was to his left was to his right. Sunny was more or less ambidextrous, but he still favored his left hand... now, he weirdly felt his right hand was more responsive.

The corpse in lustrous armor was still there. The sky was painted pale lilac by the light of dawn. The Chain Breaker hung above him, with only a few branches of the sacred tree visible from this angle.

But... only the flying ship was reflecting in the polished breastplate now. The reflections of the cohort were gone.

A cold chill ran down his spine.

'I…'

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'...am inside of a reflection.'

He perceived his companions through shadow sense, making sure that they were still with him. Thankfully, they seemed to be unharmed.

Before Sunny could ascertain the situation, though, a familiar voice resounded from behind him.

It was just as it had been years ago, in the empty darkness of the Sky Below:

"My, oh my. Sunless… ladies… ah, I am so incredibly glad to see that you've been able to make it…"

Chapter-1498: Mirror Realm

Sunny slowly turned around and looked behind him… and there he was, the Prince of Nothing.

Mordret looked almost exactly like he had the first time Sunny saw his true face. Tall, slender, with raven-black hair and a sharp face that wasn't exactly handsome, but possessed a strange beauty to it. His most striking feature, however, were his mirror-like eyes, which reflected the world back on itself like two pools of liquid silver.

There was a pleasant, but hollow smile on Mordret's lips.

'Wait… something is wrong.'

Sunny frowned.

The last time he had seen the Prince of Nothing, moments before entering the Seed of Nightmare, the bastard was battered and bruised, covered in dried blood, and missing a hand. But now, Mordret looked perfectly fine — there were no wounds on his body and no bloodstains on his tunic. Even his hand was back, as if it had never been severed.

Mordret's smile widened slightly when he noticed Sunny's gaze. Raising the hand in question, he waved at them.

"It doesn't seem like I've been missed. How hurtful."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then asked cautiously:

"Where are we?"

The space surrounding them looked like one of the floating fortresses of Twilight's chain barrier, but it was also different. Not even mentioning the fact that the entire world had flipped from left to

right, there seemed to be a… limit to this place. Not too far away from them, the dreadful battlefield disappeared, turning into pure nothing.

It was as though someone had erased most of the world, leaving only a small island of matter drifting in the sea of nothingness.

'It only encompasses what is reflected in the polished breastplate.'

Sunny felt a chill when he realized that fact. It seemed that his theory that Mordret had somehow pulled them into a reflection was correct. Indeed, the space they had found themselves in only contained the part of the world that reflected in the lustrous breastplate of the withered corpse, and a small area around it.

The Prince of Nothing looked around, then raised his hands in a welcoming gesture.

"Ah. This is… let's call it the Mirror Realm. Consider it an extension of my Ascended Ability. In a sense, it is."

Sunny did not like the sound of these words at all. Neither did his companions.

Frowning slightly, Nephis placed her hand on the hilt of her sword and asked in an even tone:

"In a sense?"

Mordret hesitated.

"Well… it's a long story. Sadly, time is a luxury that we can't afford at the moment."

Cassie tilted her head a little.

"Why not?"

He gave her a guarded look, then looked around with discomfort.

"There are dangers prowling in this Mirror Realm, just like there are outside it. I have already taken a considerable risk by coming to warn

you. Do not continue on your way to Twilight… otherwise, you will never come back."

His ominous warning hung between them, turning the eerie atmosphere of the fallen fortress even more frightening.

Sunny took a deep breath, then asked in a dark tone:

"Why? Aren't you here? And where is Kai? You haven't done anything to him, have you? Because, if you did… you better start praying to the dead gods…"

Mordret stared at him for a moment.

"Ah, so much hostility. Granted, I might have deserved such treatment, a bit... but don't fret. Your friend should still be alive. In fact, I'm quite confident that he is. As for how I am able to hold this conversation, you are mistaken.

I am not, in fact, here. My reflection is, while my body is lost somewhere in Twilight. If you want to know more, though… you'll have to come with me to somewhere we'll be safe from the monster roaming this Mirror Realm. You might not value your lives, but I do."

Sunny shook his head.

"That is not good enough. What monster are you talking about? And what do you mean, your body is lost? Was it destroyed? Are you a mirror ghost again?"

The Prince of Nothing looked at him with a somber expression.

"It's not nice to call people ghosts, Sunless."

Sunny scoffed.

"Since when am I a nice person? Just answer the questions, dammit!"

Mordret sighed.

"My body is… not destroyed. It's just trapped within the city. As far as I was able to ascertain, it has something to do with the

enchantment array that was set up by the inhabitants of Twilight — in any case, I can't freely move in the physical world. The same goes for your friend, Nightingale. The difference is that I am able to escape into the mirrors, while he can't.

It's for the best, really… even I have barely survived here."

Sunny wanted to say something, but Nephis interrupted him. Raising a hand, she said impassively:

"One of us stayed back to guard the ship. Is she in danger, as well?"

Mordret shook his head.

"As long as the ship does not come closer to Twilight, she'll be fine. It is us, the visitors of the mirror realm, who are in danger. However, this is also the only place where we can talk… unless one of you is willing to surrender your body to me, of course."

He glanced at them and grinned.

"I guess none of you are, though?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and growled, his voice full of threatening malice:

"You're goddamn right. Don't even think about it!"

Mordret sighed.

"Well, then. I don't have much essence left, but it's enough to invite one more person…"

With that, there was a sound of ringing glass, and Effie was suddenly standing near them, a perplexed expression on her face.

...However, it was the Prince of Nothing who looked truly startled. His usual mask of pleasant friendliness cracked for a moment, revealing a hint of sincere bewilderment.

Staring at Effie's belly, Mordret remained silent for a few moments, and then said incredulously:

"Ascended Athena… uh… why… why are you…"

Hearing that, Effie smiled sweetly.

"Pregnant? Well… you see, Your Highness… when a man and a woman love each other very much…"

Sunny's face twitched.

'No way...'

Was it really happening?

Chapter-1499: Prince's Old Clothes

While Effie was giving Mordret — who silently listened to her with a strange expression on his usually composed face — the talk about the birds and the bees, Sunny secretly looked around.

'A mirror realm…'

He had never learned what Mordret's Ascended Ability was — and he did not really know now, either. But it seemed to have something to do with establishing a physical space in the realm of reflections, or at least a space capable of containing physical items and living things.

So, in a sense, Mordret carried within himself a pocket dimension, similar to Effie's Supreme Memory. It was a pure utility Ability. But there were still many questions about its reach and extent…

For example, could any reflection become an entrance to this Mirror Realm? No… he had called it a mirror realm. So could there be many of such realms? What was the scope of the space he could create? What were its limitations?

The idyllic meadow inside Effie's locket, for example, was around three kilometers across. Additionally, while she could send people and creatures inside without asking for permission, it was easy to escape — all one had to do was reach the edge of the small world and attack its painted boundaries.

With enough force, the fabric of the pocket dimension would come undone, and the locket would be damaged.

What about Mordret's mirror realm? He had already shown the ability to pull people inside against their will, even from some distance. How would one escape being trapped in a reflection?

What powers did Mordret possess within this mirror world that he did not have outside? More than that… could it be connected to two reflections at the same time, serving as a bridge between two physical places?

There were too many questions.

'No, I'm thinking about it wrong.'

The Prince of Nothing had not said that this was a manifestation of his Ascended Ability. He had said that it was an extension of it. How had his Ability been extended? Who had extended it?

And why was there a monster roaming its expanse… one dangerous enough to make Mordret wary?

'Who could invade Mordret's mirror realm?'

A dark expression appeared on Sunny's face.

He could think of an answer. And that answer was not at all to his liking.

Finally, Mordret cleared his throat and interrupted Effie.

"I see. That… please accept my sincere congratulations... I guess? Congratulations! Ah, but we've already spent too much time here. It's time to leave."

Before any of them could say anything, the world around them rippled. In the next moment, they found themselves somewhere else… a place much different from the fallen fortress.

Sunny tensed.

There was a vast and somber expanse around them. The grey sky was covered by stormy clouds. The surface beneath their feet was shrouded in white mist. The whole space was suffused with soft light… and there, high above, a single radiant sphere was shining like a sun, its pale rays falling through the veil of storm clouds.

It seemed as though vague symbols were carved into the surface of

the sun, but Sunny could not see them clearly.

This place… resembled a Soul Sea.

Turning his head slightly, Sunny flinched.

There were motionless figures standing in a row in front of him. For a moment, he even mistook them for the silent shadows… but no, they weren't shadows. They were people, standing in the mist with empty expressions and hollow eyes.

A handsome young man wearing stylish clothes of the waking world. A woman with a weathered face, wearing cheap synthetic attire. A hunched old man in a plain suit similar to those the government officials wore. A broad-shouldered warrior clad in a suit of armor in the colors of Clan Valor, who looked familiar. A young woman in the uniform of the Evacuation army… and a few more.

There were several Nightmare Creatures among them, as well, each more repulsive than the previous one.

They were… Mordret's bodies.

Noticing Sunny's appalled gaze, the Prince of Nothing grinned.

"Perusing my wardrobe? I hope you don't mind."

Sunny gritted his teeth and looked at his companions, who all stared at the hollow bodies with repulsed expressions. He shook his head and turned away.

Mordret chuckled.

"Why, don't look at me as if I'm some kind of monster. These people weren't using their bodies well, anyway. Like this one…"

He patted the handsome young man on the shoulder.

"I took his body while he was dangling in a noose. That one had only a few excruciating hours left to live, her body full of poison from years of toil in an underground factory. This one… well, this one was surprisingly healthy. But he had siphoned the credits meant for

security measures and falsified inspection results to keep the factory running.

Ah, well, the one next to him is a retainer of Clan Valor. Enough said…"

Mordret shook his head.

"I too have standards, you know."

Then, noticing Sunny's unconvinced gaze — and perhaps remembering the time he tried to steal Sunny's own body for no reason whatsoever, apart from convenience — he added with an elegant smile:

"...When it suits me. In any case, we should be safe here. This space is mine and mine alone."

Sunny took a deep breath, then looked around. Finally, he showed a sign of interest.

"Is this… your Soul Sea?"

Mordret took a few steps forward, his feet drowning in the swirling mist, and stopped beneath the pale sun.

"It is a reflection of my Soul Sea, technically. This is the true manifestation of my Ascended Ability."

Sunny remained silent for a moment. Suddenly, he remembered the day Nightmare had come into his true power as a Terror, unlocking the [Dream Curse] Ability.

'I wonder… this Ascended Ability of his. Could it be called a lesser mirror domain?'

But then, he frowned.

"Wait… if this is your mirror realm, then what was that reflection of the floating fortress?"

Mordret smiled silently.

"What else? It's a manifestation of the same Ability, just not mine. My powers are not grand enough to encompass an entire city, let alone its surroundings. I simply snuck there like a thief. The true master of that place…"

He grew silent for a moment and then added in a displeased tone:

"Is a rather unpleasant fellow. I think he goes by Soul Stealer."

Chapter-1500: Perfect Trap

'What?!'

The members of the cohort all stared at Mordret, their expressions grim. Noticing their reaction, he smiled.

"I was rather surprised to learn about the identities of these Six Plagues, but it seems that you are already familiar with them. Good. It will spare me the explanations."

At that moment, Jet, who had been keeping quiet until then, finally spoke:

"Soul Stealer is here, in Twilight?"

Mordret remained silent for a few moments. Eventually, he sighed.

"He is. I've been playing hide and seek with him for... gods, I don't even know how long. Time is a funny concept here in Twilight, really. And let me tell you, there is no worse company than a demented Nightmare Creature version of yourself."

He remained silent for a moment, then added matter-of-factly:

"He's not the only one, either. The Dread Lord is here, too."

Sunny flinched, experienced a visceral reaction to those words.

'Damnation!'

Suddenly, he felt vulnerable and exposed, surrounded by terrible danger. None of them had felt safe while approaching Twilight, but still... the sense of pure dread he felt at the mention of the ruler of Verge was almost palpable.

It was not that Sunny was afraid of the Dread Lord — he knew that

the cohort would have to clash with the leader of the Plagues eventually. But facing him already was simply too unexpected, too sudden...

'What the hell is happening?!'

Twilight was supposed to be their last stop before the final battle… not the final battle itself! How could the tyrant of Verge already be here, within reach?

How could they already be in his grasp?

Nephis gripped the hilt of her sword, clearly thinking the same.

Mordret, meanwhile, shook his head.

"Oh, please forgive me. I should have mentioned first that you don't have to worry about the Dread Lord. He can't harm us. In fact, Soul Stealer can't harm us either, unless we enter his territory. They are just as trapped as I am. And your friend, Nightingale, is."

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

"Can you just explain what is going on, damn it?!"

Mordret gave him an amused glance.

"Why, certainly. I was just getting to it… ah, but I've been waiting for this moment for so long. It will be a shame not to enjoy it."

He looked at each of them with a pleasant smile, and then shrugged.

"Where do I start? First… as you might have noticed, there was a terrible battle here, in Twilight, countless years ago. The forces of Defilement… that is what it's called, right?... wanted to destroy the city, while the warriors of Twilight naturally wanted to prevent it from happening."

He sighed theatrically.

"Sadly, they failed. Suffering terrible losses, the abominations broke through the outer barrier and breached the walls of the city. From

what I gathered, that was possible because the Defiled Legion was led by the Dread Lord, as well as my own Corrupted self. Mind you, everything I know was observed while exploring the mirrored version of Twilight.

I haven't spoken to a soul since entering the Nightmare… so, my information might be wrong or incomplete."

Mordret remained silent for a moment.

"In any case, from the looks of it, the walls were breached, and the Dread Lord entered the city with the remaining Nightmare Creatures. The streets of Twilight are a battlefield… countless humans desperately fighting against the abominations and their terrible master, while some seem to be turning into abominations themselves. It's a proper mess."

There was something strange about what he had said.

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"...Are a battlefield? Not were a battlefield?"

The Prince of Nothing nodded with a dark smile.

"Indeed. In the midst of this titanic battle, you see… someone activated the enchantment array of the city. A truly powerful sorcery was awakened, its influence swallowing all of Twilight…"

Sunny groaned inwardly.

'Wind Flower did tell me about it, didn't she? That the defensive array of Twilight was similar to the vast enchantment of Aletheia's Island. Both even used a fragment of the Estuary as a core.'

He sighed.

"Don't tell me. Does the same day keep repeating itself in Twilight?"

Mordret gave him a strange look.

"What? No… what gave you such an odd idea? That would be quite

bizarre."

'Huh?'

Sunny stared back at him, confused.

"Then what did the activation of the defensive array do?"

The Prince of Nothing lingered for a moment, then smiled.

"Well… simply put… it froze time."

The members of the cohort stared at him incredulously.

"Froze… time?"

Effie's voice sounded a bit exasperated, as if she was tired of time behaving in all the wrong ways here, on the Great River.

And who could blame her? Sunny felt the same.

Hearing her tone, Mordret smiled.

"Ah… it seems like you have experienced more than your fair share of strangeness here in the Tomb of Ariel. But, answering your question — yes, it froze time. The moment the defensive array was activated, time inside Twilight completely stopped. And so, the battle raging on its streets stopped, as well."

He shook his head.

"The citizens and warriors of Twilight are standing there like statues, frozen in strange poses. The Nightmare Creatures are the same. Even the Dread Lord, despite all his power and authority, was caught in the trap. Now, he's more of a monument to the ruler of Verge, as opposed to an actual tyrant."

Mordret's face grew somber.

"Of course, none of them are truly dead. Just… caught between two moments, forever. If one day the defensive array is deactivated, the battle will resume, and the Dread Lord will awaken. Don't think that

you can kill him while he's vulnerable, too — the moment you step inside Twilight, the time will stop for you, as well. Even inanimate objects will be frozen in time. It's a perfect trap."

He chuckled.

"If a little desperate. Why would the people of Twilight activate the array before evacuating the city? I don't know… what I do know, though, is that the Spell played a cruel prank on me. And Nightingale."

Sunny had yet to recover from the news that the Dread Lord, someone who was supposed to be their ultimate enemy in this Nightmare, turned out to have already been removed from the board… by someone.

He did not need to guess the identity of that someone, really. Who could have manipulated the events of the siege of Twilight? It had to have been the Mad Prince… himself… who had stabbed his master in the back.

And while Sunny was reeling from the news, the meaning of the last words spoken by Mordret finally reached his mind.

His eyes narrowed.

'Wait…'

Nephis was the first one to speak:

"What do you mean? What did the Spell do?"

Mordret looked at them with a dark expression.

"Isn't it obvious? The roles it assigned to me and Nightingale were warriors of Twilight. Therefore… the moment we entered the Nightmare, we were already caught in frozen time. Stuck in an inescapable trap."

He chuckled wryly.

"My physical body is also there, standing like a statue in the middle

of a frozen battle. So is Nightingale's. It's just that my reflection had escaped into the mirror realm… but for him, not a single moment has passed since the start of the Nightmare. He doesn't even know what fate has befallen him."

The Prince of Nothing shook his head with resentment.

"Oh, and there's another creature in Twilight who is in a similar situation to mine. Soul Stealer… that monster. While my realm is modest in size, his encompasses all reflections in the city. I don't know where his physical body is hidden, but his reflection is prowling the mirrored Twilight. And it is dreadful enough to give me fright."

He grew silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"There. I think I explained the important parts. I'm sure you have questions…"

Nephis gave him a long look, then nodded.

"I have a question. If I understood it correctly… are you trying to say…"

White sparks ignited in her eyes.

"That there is an army of Awakened warriors, countless thousands of them, inside Twilight? All waiting for the defensive array to be deactivated, so that they could resume the battle against the Defilement?"

Chapter-1501: Two Choices

Sunny should have expected what question Nephis would ask. The Dread Lord was in Twilight… Soul Stealer was there, as well. The city itself was frozen in time. Finally, the truth of how it had been lost was revealed.

But what mattered most was that there was also an army of human warriors there — all the people from the Twilight Sea, except for those who had perished during the siege of Verge and the subsequent retaliation of the Defiled horde.

Could they really be saved by deactivating the defensive array?

Sunny had just the Memory to do it.

However... the things Mordret had shared with them changed the entire game.

Sure, the question Nephis had asked was reasonable. The primary goal of coming to Twilight was to rescue Kai, but they had harbored a tentative hope of finding more allies here, as well. Now, even if there was a caveat, it seemed that their hope could come true.

But… why was it that they needed allies, to begin with? It was to have enough forces in order to attack Verge, which was supposed to be guarded by the legion of Defiled abominations and the Six Plagues.

Now, three of the Plagues were gone. Of the remaining three, two were trapped here in Twilight. Numerous Defiled had either perished or become frozen in time here, as well.

Then, didn't it mean… that Verge was far more vulnerable than they had ever expected? Vulnerable enough so that the cohort had a chance of destroying the First Seeker without the aid of powerful

allies, perhaps.

It was as though the only ally they needed was the Mad Prince.

A subtle frown appeared on Sunny's face.

'Aren't I putting too much trust into a Nightmare Creature?'

Sure, the vile madman's motives seemed to align with his. But to what degree? And could an ending envisioned by a demented abomination truly fit what Sunny wanted to achieve?

It could not. For example, Sunny would have never massacred Weave and treated Ananke so cruelly — but for the Mad Prince, it was a perfectly acceptable course of action. Who was to say that the bastard had not planned for something similar to happen again?

What else would he have been willing to sacrifice in order to achieve his goal?

Doubt, doubt… Sunny was full of doubt.

Mordret, meanwhile, raised an eyebrow with an amused smile. He studied Nephis for a few moments, then answered in a pleasant tone:

"Why… although I can't be entirely sure, it appears so. Yes, there seems to be an army of Awakened warriors in Twilight, all waiting to resume the battle against the Defilement."

He paused briefly.

"Do remember that there is also an army of the Nightmare Creatures there, complete with two dreadful Defiled champions. But what of it? The point is moot... unless you have discovered a method to control the defensive array of Twilight during your travels, of course."

Mordret looked at each of them in turn, and then asked with a hint of curiosity:

"Have you?"

Jet raised her eyebrow slightly.

"You seem to be strangely certain that we have."

The Prince of Nothing chuckled.

"Ah, I'll admit it. Yes, I am quite confident that you do, indeed, possess the means of lifting the curse enveloping Twilight. The Spell is always fair, after all… in its own perverse way. Granted, I find its treatment very distasteful this time around. I have been left with no choice but to rely on others to help me escape this predicament, more or less."

He smiled.

"But that is exactly why I believe that you, the others in question, must have a way of helping me free myself. Otherwise, the Spell would have been entirely unreasonable, which it never is."

Sunny scoffed.

"Help you? Do we have a reason to help you? All of us are in this mess because of you. If it wasn't for you and your schemes, the Battle of the Black Skull would have never happened, and we wouldn't have ended up in this damned Nightmare."

Mordret studied him with a friendly smile, then shrugged nonchalantly.

"Such a small trifle. Are you still mad about it? You should really learn how to let go of past grievances and forgive people, Sunless. Holding onto spite is a terrible way to live a life. Just look at me! You spoke so convincingly about not wanting to serve the Great Clans, then went and joined the army of Valor anyway.

But am I mad? No… I graciously forgave you a long time ago."

He looked at them with reproach, waited for a few moments, and shrugged.

"Well, if that does not convince you, there is still your friend Nightingale. You might not feel very motivated to help me, but what about him? You aren't going to leave him to rot in Twilight, are you?"

Sunny glared at the Prince of Nothing for a bit, then grimaced and shook his head.

"No… most likely. And yes, we do have a way to control the defensive array. However, it is not a given that we should."

He looked at Nephis and said, his voice somber:

"As I see it, we have two choices. One is to enter Twilight, deactivate the array, then try to kill the Dread Lord and Soul Stealer with the help of Daeron's army. If we survive, the seven of us will lead that army to besiege Verge and finish off Torment and the First Seeker."

His expression darkened.

"The other choice is to leave Twilight without facing the Dread Lord and go directly to Verge, just the five of us. There can't be that many Defiled left there, serving Torment… it will be dangerous, of course, but perhaps less dangerous than fighting the Dread Lord and Soul Stealer."

Mordret coughed.

"Aren't you forgetting something? Abandoning your friend to avoid danger… ah, how heartless. Really, Sunless, I thought better of you."

Sunny gave him a dirty look.

"Who is abandoning who? If we manage to destroy the First Seeker, the Nightmare will be over. Both of you will return to the waking world as Saints without having done anything."

Mordret shook his head.

"What if you fail? At the risk of sounding presumptuous… you know what I am capable of. Don't you think that having me with you will increase our chances of escaping the Nightmare? Seven is much better than five, anyway. There is no reason to settle for less when you can have more."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed and looked at Nephis. Honestly… he found himself agreeing with Mordret. Not only

because having the Prince of Nothing fighting by their side would be a boon during the assault on Verge, but simply because leaving Kai behind did not sit right with him.

Sunny was not a superstitious man, but he knew more about fate than most. Sure, in theory, a person could conquer a Nightmare without contributing anything to its completion. But in practice, the Spell was never that kind. One way or the other, trying to hide and bide your time almost always invited disaster.

So, even if there was no logical reason to worry about Kai, Sunny had a feeling that simply leaving their friend frozen in time would not end well — both for him and for them.

After hesitating for a few moments, he shook his head.

"I don't know. Neph… it's your decision."

She glanced at him, then shrugged.

Her answer was just as he had expected:

"What is there to decide? Let's kill the Dread Lord. We'll go conquer the Nightmare after he is dead."

Chapter-1502: Flawed Reflection

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then shook her hand and gripped the hilt of her sword. Sparks of white flame were still dancing in her beautiful grey eyes.

"I am not suggesting it rashly. We have already faced two of the Six Plagues, so we know how fearsome they are…"

Mordret looked at her in surprise.

"Wait… you did?"

She nodded.

"Yes. There were unique circumstances that allowed us to exploit their Flaws. As a result, Undying Slaughter killed Devouring Beast, and was then finished off by the five of us. She had been greatly weakened… and still, we barely managed to survive that battle."

Nephis glanced at Sunny. Then, a hint of a smile appeared on her lips.

Glancing at Mordret, she said:

"Oh, and Sunny personally erased the Mad Prince from existence… so thoroughly that there's not even a corpse left. So, the Six Plagues are now down to Three."

Sunny stared at her incredulously. Everything she had said was technically true… the Mad Prince had, indeed, been erased from existence by Sunny — because Sunny was the Mad Prince. There had not been a corpse left by the transition, either.

But why did it sound so… so… misleading and outrageous!

'Did she just… steal a page from my book?'

Was it really the right time to tease him?!

Nephis, meanwhile, ignored the amused smile on Mordret's lips and continued:

"In any case, I am not underestimating the threat posed by the Dread Lord and Soul Stealer. I would not have suggested facing them directly in other circumstances — at least not without being able to thoroughly prepare a battlefield of our choosing. But the situation is different here, in Twilight. Here, we'll have an army of allies on our side.

This might very well be the best chance of slaying these monsters we'll ever have. One I am unwilling to pass by."

She remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"However, I will not force anyone to follow this plan. You'll have to decide for yourself."

As soon as she was done talking, Mordret smiled brightly.

"Why, I think that it is a great plan! Lady Changing Star, you are truly wise… your exalted reputation is very well deserved, it seems. How wonderful."

His smile was perfectly sincere, but Sunny knew the bastard well enough to guess what he was really thinking. Something like…

'It's just a shame that I'll have to gruesomely kill you in the future. Well… since it's inevitable, I might as well try to enjoy the process, when the day comes…'

Sunny's eyes darkened.

He stared at Mordret for a bit, then spat through gritted teeth:

"I don't mind killing Soul Stealer… oh, and the Dread Lord… either."

Jet simply shrugged.

"We'll only ever challenge a Third Nightmare once. Might as well do it right."

Effie was the last to speak. Holding her belly, she hesitated for a bit, then smiled.

"I mean, we're not really going to leave Kai in this pit, are we? Let's come up with a good plan and crush those bastards. Or, if we can't, let's grab Kai and run away in the chaos. I'm sure we can manage that, at least."

Finally, all eyes settled on Nephis. She nodded solemnly and looked at Mordret.

Her face was motionless, with only the white flames dancing in the depths of her striking grey eyes.

"See, Lord Mordret… we are willing to help you escape Twilight. However, there is a condition."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Do tell what you have in mind."

She remained silent for a while, studying him, then said in an even tone:

"As I already mentioned, we were able to slay Undying Slaughter. However, it wasn't because we were more powerful than her. Instead, it was because we managed to exploit her Flaw — since the Plagues are Defiled versions of ourselves, the knowledge of their Flaws is the best weapon we possess."

Nephis crossed her arms and added, her expression somber:

"Sadly, the Dread Lord does not possess a Flaw that we can exploit. That already robs us of our main advantage. As for Soul Stealer… we simply don't know what his Flaw is. Only you know that. So, if you want our help, you'll have to share that knowledge. At least in case it can help us defeat him."

Mordret looked at them with a pleasant smile. Then, he laughed.

"You want to know what my Flaw is? How daring! Should I help you tie a noose around my neck, while we're at it?"

Nephis did not respond, simply staring at him with her radiant eyes.

Slowly, the smile disappeared from Mordret's face. He sighed, then shook his head with a reluctant expression.

"Forget it. Soul Stealer's Flaw cannot help you kill him, anyway. Because… it's not here."

Confused, Sunny gave him a long look.

"What do you mean, it's not here?"

Mordret shrugged.

"I mean just that. My Flaw is not here, in the Nightmare. I didn't bring it along… it would be quite foolish to carry something that dangerous around, wouldn't it?"

His expression was a bit dejected, as if he was not happy about having to share even that little piece of information with them.

Sunny, meanwhile, was stunned.

'What? What kind of Flaw can be carried around or left behind? Does it exist outside Mordret?'

He had never heard about a Flaw like that.

…But then again, he had never heard about someone like the Prince of Nothing. Divine Aspects were both extremely rare and bizarre, so who was to say that Mordret's Flaw wasn't just as odd?

Nephis sighed.

"...So how do we kill him?"

Mordret grimaced.

"Kill him… it's not going to be easy. As you might know, I am famously hard to kill."

He hesitated for a moment, then pointed to Sunny:

"Soul Stealer won't die if you destroy his physical body. He might not even die if you destroy his soul. To truly get rid of him, we'll need to destroy his reflection. And there are only two ways to achieve that."

The Prince of Nothing paused, then reluctantly shared the secret of how he could be killed:

"First is to defeat him in a soul battle when he tries to take possession of your body. Of all of us here, Sunless has the best chance of accomplishing something like that… perhaps Changing Star, as well. Followed by me. No offense, but the rest of you don't stand a chance."

Effie and Jet shrugged in unison.

"None taken."

Cassie, who had remained silent before, finally spoke:

"What is the second way?"

Mordret nodded.

"The second way is to destroy his physical body while there are no other bodies around, and no reflections for him to flee into, either. Needless to say, that way is not very feasible. So, we'll have to somehow lure him into the soul of either Sunless, Lady Nephis, or me."

His face suddenly grew dim.

"...Mind you, even I don't know what Soul Stealer's Transformation Ability is. So, he might give us a nasty surprise. In fact, I'm pretty sure that he will."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"That's alright. We are full of surprises, as well."

'Not the least of which is that the Mad Prince is supporting us from beyond the grave. He knew that I would receive the Crown of Twilight. He also knew that I'd come to see Wind Flower and learn about its connection to the defensive array of this city. The mad bastard had most likely trapped the Dread Lord and Soul Stealer in frozen time himself, while I'll be the one to release them.

Surely, all of it is not a coincidence.'

Nephis nodded.

"Let us share information. After learning everything you know about Twilight, we will come up with a plan and prepare."

A strange, faint smile appeared on her lips.

"And then, we will make sure that the Three Plagues are no more, and only Torment remains. We will win."

Chapter-1503: Approaching Twilight

Sunny and his companions had come to Twilight expecting a battle — and now, that battle was swiftly approaching. The identity of the enemy was far more fearsome than they had expected, as well. In fact… it was far too fearsome, while the scope of the battle was far too great.

The situation had changed too fast, leaving Sunny shaken.

'It's strange.'

He had spent… how long? Around eight months in this Nightmare. It was already longer than his stay in the Kingdom of Hope had been, and that was without even considering the long stretches of time that passed without being experienced by him. But still, Sunny had not expected the culmination of the Nightmare to happen so suddenly.

And that was what the battle in Twilight promised to be — the most dreadful and deadly confrontation they would experience in the Tomb of Ariel. The threat Verge posed paled in comparison to it. If they were to win here, in this lost and forsaken city, the rest of the Nightmare would be simply an epilogue.

Of course, that was only so because of Nephis and her [Longing]. Still…

Sunny was struggling to adjust to the shifting landscape of the Nightmare.

Nevertheless, he was ready.

Now, there were six challengers working together to pass the dreadful trial of the Spell. Well… five-and-a-half, considering that

Mordret's physical body was frozen beyond the walls of Twilight. Three of them possessed Divine Aspects, two were among the most deadly Masters in the world. There was Cassie, as well, whom Sunny could not even place into any kind of power hierarchy.

Together, they tried to come up with a plan to kill the Dread Lord and liberate Twilight. Or rather, an approach — there was too little information and too many unknown factors to formulate a specific plan. The best they could do was learn everything there was to learn and come up with various strategies, then switch between them according to the situation.

Finally, there was nothing left to discuss. Standing in the mirror version of the floating fortress once again, the six of them looked beyond its walls, into the twilight haze of dawn.

Mordret was strangely withdrawn. Eventually, he smiled.

"There is no point in wasting time. Remember… stay close to me at all times. I will try to hide us from Soul Stealer's gaze as best I can."

He paused for a moment and then added nonchalantly:

"Of course, we can still stumble upon that monster directly. If that happens… well. At least it will be painless."

With a chuckle, he jumped over the battlement and swiftly climbed down the crumbling wall of the fortress. The rest of them followed, careful not to make too much noise.

Luckily, there were no spikes protruding from the base of the fortress on the other side. Sunny and his companions were able to descend easily, stepping on the carapace of a dead behemoth that floated in the still water below the wall.

Mordret was already there, waiting for them.

"The chain barrier protecting the city was broken, but it was not the only defensive measure prepared by Twilight. The Dread Lord paid a heavy price to reach the city wall. Ah, but you can see for yourselves… a thrilling sight, isn't it?"

Sunny did not share his enthusiasm. The surface of the Great River in front of them was covered by a carpet of giant corpses. The abominations that had perished here had been terribly mangled, their grotesque bodies littered with ghastly wounds. Here and there, broken ships were floating in still water, with masts that rose into the haze like dead trees.

Taking a step forward, Mordret headed to the edge of the carapace.

"We can move freely here in the mirror realm. If we weren't in a reflection, however, the frozen time would have already started to envelop us. The most insidious part is that we would have been none the wiser. Eventually, our time would have halted entirely, without us ever knowing. Ah, what a terrible fate."

Reaching the point where the carapace of the dead abomination disappeared underwater, he easily jumped onto the next one and beckoned them to follow.

"Come. The sooner we reach the heart of the city, the better."

Together, the six of them traversed the dreadful field of floating corpses. With each step, Sunny felt his mood turning more and more grave. The horrid landscape surrounding them was somber, bleak, and silent… but it was proof that an act of unimaginable violence had taken place here once, a long time ago.

More than that, the reflection of Soul Stealer could be somewhere close, stalking the twilight haze. He could not allow himself to lose focus.

'Damnation.'

Guided by Mordret, the cohort moved from one carcass to another, sometimes walking across the shattered decks of empty ships. There was not a single living soul aboard them… however, the closer they got to Twilight, the more well-preserved the corpses of the dead crew members seemed.

"You noticed it, I guess."

Mordret lingered for a moment, glancing at one of the dead warriors.

The man looked as if he had only died a few days ago.

The Prince of Nothing walked past.

"This close to the city wall, time is already very slow. It will stop completely beyond it."

Just as he said that, they finally saw the walls of Twilight.

Unlike Weave and Fallen Grace, which were built by connecting a scattering of island-ships, Twilight had been built on a single, vast landmass. Or rather… perhaps, landmass was not the right word to describe it. Instead, a carapace of an unfathomably immense Nightmare Creature served as its foundation.

Sunny felt petrified when he realized just how enormous that abomination must have been, once. It was far greater than anything he had even seen, incomparable to even the gargantuan Black Turtle. And yet, it was dead now, its colossal bones supporting a sprawling city.

'Makes… sense.'

Unlike Twilight, the other settlements on the Great River had not been ruled by a Sovereign. Daeron had been capable of slaying a colossal horror like this, but not the sybils. Therefore, their cities had to be composed of individual island-ships, while his did not.

There was one thing that became painfully obvious when Sunny witnessed Twilight…

The bestial Serpent King he had fought was a pale shadow of his former self. If they had clashed when Daeron was at his peak… Sunny would have been obliterated before even knowing what happened.

'And yet, he lost this battle.'

Sunny shivered.

Were they all mad, to think that they had a chance to prevail where a Supreme demigod had failed?

Chapter-1504: Frozen City

The walls of Twilight were tall and imposing, built from stone and reinforced with the scales of powerful Nightmare Creatures. In the dim twilight of the early dawn, they looked like towering black cliffs. However, now, these cliffs were shattered and ruined. Many sections of the wall had collapsed, others had been breached or severely damaged.

The corpses of dead abominations piled high, reaching the ramparts in several places.

The siege of Twilight had truly been terrible.

But what caught Sunny's attention the most was not the devastated state of the city wall, but the eerie nature of the devastation.

Time was indeed frozen in Twilight.

Shards of broken stone hung in the air, unmoving. Rivers of blood were like abstract sculptures carved from ruby. Dancing flames had turned into motionless, searing blossoms.

It was as though some deity had frozen the world in the middle of a fierce battle.

"We will have to be more careful now."

Mordret's voice was strangely somber. His usual amused smile was nowhere to be seen — instead, the Prince of Nothing seemed full of grim apprehension. Looking at the breached walls of Twilight, he sighed.

"Soul Stealer is most likely inside the city. We will move stealthily through the backstreets and reach the palace. Once we are there… the Memory of yours better work, Sunless."

Sunny suppressed the desire to grimace.

If even that bastard was nervous… the rest of them had to be ready for anything.

Without having to say much, they entered the city through one of the breaches in its wall. Finally, Twilight lay in front of them in all its glory.

It was entirely unlike the other cities Sunny had seen in the Dream Realm. There were a few similarities, of course — like the extensive use of materials scavenged from the Nightmare Creatures in construction, for example. But the architectural style of the Twilight Sea was very unique.

It was both robust and aery, paying more attention to practicality than aesthetics, but at the same time expressing the latter in a myriad of subtle ways.

Fitting for a culture that had come from a world of water and frequent storms.

Sunny did not pay a lot of attention to how the city looked, however, taken by what was happening on its streets.

There, countless humans were frozen in the midst of a terrible battle against vile Nightmare Creatures. Hundreds of thousands… no, millions of them.

Some had been frozen in the middle of swinging a sword…

Some had been frozen in the middle of being torn apart by the swarming abominations.

The gruesome sight of the frozen battle was both strange and disturbing. But what shook Sunny the most was not the eeriness of the motionless slaughter, but the faces of the people of Twilight.

Not a single one of them seemed frightened or desperate. Even those who were dying maintained calm expressions, their eyes full of cold resolve. They did not show anger or fury, either — only chillingly dark killing intent.

'Just what kind of army did the Serpent King create?'

Sure, humans from the Twilight Sea had come to the Tomb of Ariel after witnessing the destruction of their world, which had to have changed them. But they were still people. Sunny had spent plenty of time with seasoned soldiers, and none of them were immune to human emotions.

Not all of these people were soldiers, either. Some were Awakened, while most were mundane. Some were old, while some were young. And yet, he did not see a single person trying to flee or cowering in fear.

'Strange…'

Sunny suddenly felt uneasy about their chances of becoming allies with these alien people. However, he did not have time to ponder these matters — Mordret was already walking ahead, carefully maneuvering between the frozen warriors.

They entered a narrow street and stealthily advanced toward the center of the city.

As they did, Sunny found himself near their guide. He hesitated for a while, then asked quietly:

"You've been here for a long time. Don't these people seem a bit strange?"

The Prince of Nothing glanced at him with surprise.

"How so?"

Sunny frowned.

"They are too stalwart, I guess."

Mordret thought for a few moments and shrugged.

"I'm not sure. All people seem a bit strange to me."

'Figures.'

Sunny scoffed internally. But since he was already talking to Mordret, he decided to ask another question:

"You must have been really surprised to learn that there's another you walking around, huh? I know I was. It's a really weird feeling."

The Prince of Nothing raised an eyebrow, then grinned.

"Is it weird? Ah, it must be. If you say so."

Sunny stared at him impassively.

'What a curious answer.'

He did not speak after that, preferring to keep quiet. Who knew how good Soul Stealer's hearing was?

Eventually, they crossed the outskirts of the city and entered its middle part. The battle seemed much more intense here, as if all participants — both the Nightmare Creatures and the humans — were rushing toward the heart of Twilight.

Strangely enough, there were not that many abominations here. Sure, each of them was immensely powerful, but the defenders of the city still seemed to have an upper hand. The forces of the Defilement were being suppressed by them.

It made sense. A normal battle would progress in a similar fashion — the invaders would have to fight their way into the city, so their forces would gradually diminish the further away one traveled from the walls.

There was just one odd detail. Somehow, it seemed that the epicenter of the battle was not behind them, at the outskirts of the city, but instead ahead of them, near the palace of the Serpent King.

Sunny extended his shadow sense outward and frowned, feeling the row of buildings coming to an end not too far away. And indeed, they soon reached a wide open space.

Mordret lingered just before entering the square, seemingly tense.

Nephis studied the wide square, as well, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword.

"Is there another way?"

The Prince of Nothing slowly shook his head.

"Not really. The whole city is built like a fortress. The inner districts are separated from the rest, so we won't be able to reach them without exposing ourselves at least a little. Still… as you can see, the skirmish happening on this square is especially fierce. With so many humans and abominations frozen on it, we can at least hide among them."

She frowned.

"Let's go, then."

They entered the square and walked between the motionless warriors. The battle was indeed especially furious in this area — there were so many people and Nightmare Creatures here that their bodies formed a bizarre labyrinth. Sometimes, Sunny found it hard to squeeze between their frozen figures.

Crouching, he crawled beneath a sword that was being plunged into the neck of a repulsive abomination. Standing up, he had to twist his body to avoid touching a frozen fountain of ruby blood. Then, he came face-to-face with a warrior whose arm was being severed by the fangs of a towering Nightmare Creature.

Sunny shivered.

The humans and the abominations were not statues or life-like mannequins. They were entirely real. He could see every hair, every bead of sweat, every drop of blood on the fangs of the frenzied monsters that surrounded him. All of them were simply frozen in time… and although Sunny knew that it could not happen, he found it hard not to feel as if these warriors would start moving any moment now.

The swords would come down, the frozen blood would flow, and the hungry maws would snap shut, turning the silent square into an

inescapable hell of bloodshed and violence.

'Just keep moving.'

He forced himself to ignore the ominous feeling and advanced forward, step by step.

Very soon, however, Sunny collided with Mordret's back. The Prince of Nothing had chosen that moment to stop walking, for some reason.

"What's the matter?"

Annoyed, Sunny looked up… and froze, noticing how grim Mordret was.

His mirror-like eyes were reflecting the frozen world, full of blood and darkness.

A moment later, the Prince of Nothing looked back at them and smiled.

Then, he said in a perfectly calm tone:

"Stay… absolutely… still."

Chapter-1505: Shape of His Soul

All of them froze, fading into the chaotic scene of the motionless battlefield. Surrounded by unmoving warriors and Nightmare Creatures, the six Masters were nearly indistinguishable from them.

Sunny and Mordret were next to each other, while Nephis was a few steps away. Effie and Jet were right behind her, separated from the rest of the group by a few meters.

They held their breaths.

'Soul Stealer is near…'

Sunny did not see or sense the Defiled Saint, but there was no other reason for Mordret to warn them. The Prince of Nothing looked too tense. A pleasant smile was playing on his lips, but his eyes were full of cold darkness. Sunny saw his own pale reflection in them… and then, he saw something else there, as well.

A cold shiver ran down his spine.

'Did… did something move at the edge of the square?'

He did not dare to speak aloud, but there was the [Blessing of Dusk]. Activating the enchantment of the Shroud of Graceless Dusk, he established a mental connection between himself and Mordret:

[What is happening?]

The Prince of Nothing remained as motionless as a statue. Even his eyes continued to stare at the same spot. However, his answer arrived shortly:

[Why, what else? Soul Stealer is here. He must have sensed us.]

Sunny suppressed a strong desire to grit his teeth and calmed his

heart. Making sure that it wasn't beating too loudly, he asked:

[How? Didn't you say that you would hide our presence from him?]

A hint of dark amusement appeared in Mordret's eyes.

[Did I? No, not quite. I only said that I would try to hide it, remember? Which I did.]

He paused for a moment and added in a dejected tone:

[Soul Stealer's mirror realm encompasses the entire city. Therefore, he can perceive everything that happens here, all at once. I've been manipulating countless reflections to mask our presence — every puddle of water, every shard of glass, every polished sword, every pair of eyes. Forgive me for making it sound like an easy task, but it's not.

Regardless, we've only come this far because of me… but now, it seems that our luck has run out.]

Sunny forced himself to remain calm. It was a bit hard, considering that an even more sinister, more evil version of the Prince of Nothing could have been following their scent.

[So, what now?]

Mordret shifted his gaze slightly.

[Now... well. Might I suggest praying? Perhaps that monster won't notice us.]

After that, he fell silent.

'Damn it…'

With no other choice, Sunny continued to stand in place, pretending to be one of the frozen warriors. They had discussed the possibility of something like this happening, of course, but only as the worst-case scenario. To think that their plan would be at the risk of being derailed before the battle even began… this step had been supposed to be the easiest one.

The true hardship would arrive when the array was deactivated, and the battle against the Defiled legion resumed.

A few moments passed in absolute silence.

And then, Sunny felt it… the ground beneath his feet shaking subtly, as if something terribly heavy was approaching them with measured steps.

He could not turn around and take a look, but Mordret's eyes were like two mirrors. The bloody scene of the frozen battlefield reflected in them, and so, Sunny caught a glimpse of the creature that emerged from between the houses, entering the square.

His blood turned cold in his veins.

Soul Stealer… or rather, the reflection of Soul Stealer… looked unlike anything he had imagined.

Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast had been changed and twisted by the Defilement. However, they still resembled their former selves.

Soul Stealer did not.

In fact, he did not resemble anything Sunny had ever seen.

The vague figure that entered the square did not look like a human, but it did not look like an abomination either. Instead, it was like an amalgamation of countless people and numerous Nightmare Creatures, all fused together into a harrowing patchwork monster. The contours of its body constantly changed, as if light refracted when touching it.

Or maybe they were indeed changing, shifting from one shape to another.

With each of its steps, the ground shook.

'Gods… what the hell is that thing?'

Sunny was appalled and more than a little bit rattled. Not only

because of how eerie and alien the reflection of the creature looked, but also because there were seven nodes of vile darkness permeating his… its?... monstrous body.

Soul Stealer was a Corrupted Titan.

Sunny shifted his gaze and stared at Mordret for a moment.

It was the source of this horror, standing next to him with a pleasant smile on his lips. Using that smile to cover the eerie, unnerving wrongness hiding behind it.

'Should we really be helping this bastard Transcend?'

He hesitated for a moment, then threw these thoughts out of his head. Here in the Nightmare, it was good to have Mordret on their side… it was infinitely better, at least, than having him as their enemy.

[What kind of a weird Transformation Ability is this? What is he capable of in this form?]

The Prince of Nothing lingered with an answer.

[...It's not a Transformation Ability, per se. It's simply the shape of his soul. His physical body looks different, hidden somewhere in Twilight. I've never been able to find it.]

He paused for a moment.

[Becoming Defiled did a real number on me, didn't it? Bah! So unsightly.]

With that, Mordret's eyes shook a little.

[That's not what we should be concerned with, though. The real problem... is that the monster is moving straight for us.]

By then, the quaking of the ground had grown more pronounced. Sunny cursed inwardly, but still remained motionless. Surrounded by frozen warriors and abominations, with his back turned to the approaching Titan… needless to say, every cell in his body was

screaming of danger, pushing him to move.

[So, what do we do?]

Mordret remained silent for a few moments, then suddenly turned his head and looked directly at Sunny.

There was no humor left in his cold, mirror-like eyes.

"I guess it's time for desperate measures. How unfortunate. It's up to you now, Sunless!"

As soon as Mordret moved, there was a chilling sound from behind them, and something swift tore through the air in their direction. A massive, terrifyingly deep shadow fell on Sunny, making him feel as if he was drowning in it.

"Damn it!"

He was already turning, instinctively trying to summon the Sin of Solace.

However, all Sunny saw was the fabric of reality around them cracking like glass, and then shattering to reveal…

He was violently thrown out of the mirror realm, crashing on the cobblestones of Twilight — the real Twilight, not its perfect reflection.

'Damn it all!'

The only contingency they had in case Soul Stealer discovered them was to escape the world of reflections altogether. Mordret had managed to send them back at the very last moment… so, they were safe, for now.

But the problem was that everyone, including the Prince of Nothing himself, was now frozen in time.

…Everyone except for Sunny, who was protected from the influence of the defensive array by the Crown of Twilight.

Standing up, he uttered a quiet curse and looked up, at the distant dome of the Serpent King's palace.

Now, he alone could reach it.

Chapter-1506: Heart of Twilight

The Crown of Twilight was more than a Supreme Memory. It was also the symbol of power that Daeron, the Serpent King, had wielded, as well as the key to the enchantment array enveloping his city.

Therefore, the person wearing it was immune to the influence of frozen time… in a way.

'Curse it all…'

There was a cost to remaining unaffected by the frozen time. Looking around, Sunny felt his essence being devoured at a frightening rate — the Crown was using it to protect him. Usually, his reserves would have been drained in a matter of seconds, turning him into another prisoner of Twilight… but, luckily, the Crown was also helping him replenish the spent essence.

He was still losing more than he was gaining, but at least the rate of attrition was not too great. Sunny would not have been able to traverse the entire city, but now that he was most of the way to the palace, he stood a good chance.

As long as he did not waste any time.

'I should hurry.'

Their exit from Soul Stealer's mirror realm must have been a violent one, because Sunny was not on the square anymore. Instead, he found himself somehow thrown a few hundred meters away from his previous position, at the edge of the inner district they had been aiming for.

He was protected by the Crown, but his shadows were not. Therefore, Sunny had kept them tightly wrapped around his body in advance, just in case disaster struck. Now that it had, he did not dare send

them to search for his companions.

Mordret had to have sent everyone into the real Twilight. Here in the true version of the lost city, Soul Stealer was just as powerless as the rest of the frozen abominations… but the rest of the cohort had become frozen in time, as well. So had the Prince of Nothing himself.

It was all up to Sunny.

'We'll find each other when I deactivate the array.'

Turning his back to the frozen battlefield, Sunny dashed forward. He ran as fast as he could, barely dodging the motionless figures of the warriors of Twilight, who all seemed to have been moving in the same direction as him.

Here in the inner districts, there were very few rampaging Nightmare Creatures. However, the signs of destruction were everywhere, as if the city had withstood a devastating bombardment — many buildings had been entirely shattered, and numerous people had perished under the rubble. Blood was flowing like a river, frozen in time like the rest of Twilight.

Sunny was an Ascended Terror, and so, his running speed was far past being superhuman. He navigated the frozen city as best he could, but it was hard to maintain that speed on the crowded streets. On more than one occasion, he failed to react in time and collided with the frozen warriors of Twilight or pieces of shattered stone hanging in the air.

Each time, he was tossed back, as if hitting an indestructible wall. The people and objects frozen in time were completely immune to outside influence — and so, he could only avoid them.

'Argh, damn it…'

Finally, he was forced to slow down. This close to the palace, there were too many people for him to run, and too many destroyed buildings to try moving across the rooftops. Using Shadow Step was only going to rob him of precious essence, so he had to continue on foot.

After struggling for several minutes, Sunny finally pushed his way through the crowd of frozen warriors and entered the heart of Twilight.

In front of him, separated from the buildings by a vast, ravaged park, stood the Serpent King's palace.

However, Sunny did not pay any attention to its magnificent grandeur and unique architecture. Raising his gaze, he looked at the grandiose dome of the palace and shuddered.

'W—what the hell…'

A harrowing, beautiful creature was perched on top of the cracked dome, its talons piercing the crumbling stone. Its glistening scales were the color of the midnight sky, appearing entirely black in the dim twilight of the early dawn. Its vast wings were open, obscuring the heavens. Its sinister eyes burned like distant, cold stars, full of malevolent will and merciless fury.

It was a dragon.

The dragon's terrifying maw was wide open, frozen in the middle of a deafening roar. Porcelain fangs glistened in the dismal darkness, each resembling a sharp mountain peak.

The tyrant of the night sky was beautiful… no, it should have been. But, instead, it somehow appeared dreadful and utterly hideous. A vile, tyrannical aura emanated from the giant creature, suffused with festering madness. Even unmoving, it instilled Sunny with cold terror.

…That dragon was the target of the countless warriors who were rushing toward the palace. They assaulted him like a sea, only to be broken, mutilated, and thrown back. Blood and mangled bodies were falling down like rain, frozen in the air by the halted time.

Sunny allowed himself to remain still for a moment, enthralled by the eeriness of this harrowing scene.

'The Dread Lord…'

So, the Dread Lord had attacked the heart of the city directly. Daeron's palace was already partially destroyed, its dome on the verge of collapsing. It was unclear if the throne room even existed anymore.

Sunny gritted his teeth and rushed forward.

'There is… something eerie about this scene.'

The hideous dragon made for an ominous and startling sight, but the warriors of Twilight were equally haunting. The way they threw themselves into the maws of death without a hint of doubt or agitation made Sunny feel uneasy. There were mundane humans among them, as well… surely, they realized that nothing they could do would harm the Defiled Saint.

Did they really know no fear?

Throwing the unnecessary thoughts out of his head, Sunny climbed over the rubble and entered the palace. He did not have a lot of essence left, so there was little time to find the throne room.

Once there, he would also have to figure out a way to use the Crown of Twilight and deactivate the defensive array. Sadly, it did not come with an instruction manual…

'Damn it, damn it, damn it all!'

Sunny followed the widest of the corridors, hoping that they would lead him to the throne room. Daeron had been a Sovereign, and brought a cohort of Saints with him into the Tomb of Ariel… surely, he would have built his palace to accommodate their Transformation Abilities.

Most of the areas within the palace were only meant for humans, but the truly important places had to be large enough for Saints. Otherwise, if an enemy suddenly attacked, they would not be able to show their strength.

The throne room would, without a doubt, be one of these important places. At least Sunny hoped so, knowing that he did not have enough time left to scour the entire palace.

Soon, a huge gate appeared in front of him — now broken and turned into a pile of debris. Behind it was an enormous hall. Stark rays of light fell through the cracks in the dome above it, plunging it into twilight.

At the center of the hall was a tall dais, with an imposing throne on top of it. The throne was cut roughly from stone…

More precisely, it was cut from a single slab of lusterless black stone.

Sunny stared at it for a brief moment.

'Found it.'

Daeron's throne… all of it… had been cut from a fragment of the Estuary.

It was the lock of the defensive array of Twilight, while his crown was its key.

Chapter-1507: Twilight Throne

Sunny stared at the black throne. The grand hall of the Serpent King's palace was empty and dim, stone debris littering the floor and hanging in the air, dust particles frozen in the stark rays of light. Despite the cataclysmic battle happening outside, it was perfectly silent — except for the hoarse sounds of his breathing.

'Right. Let's do this…'

He felt a complicated mix of relief, anticipation, and dread. Relief and anticipation because he had made it in time, dread because the battle against the horde of the Defilement would resume the moment he accomplished his task.

The monstrous Soul Stealer, the harrowing Dread Lord… they were going to have to fight these beings. Sunny still remembered the terror of facing a Corrupted Titan in battle. The Winter Beast alone had been enough to wipe out the remains of the First Evacuation Army and the millions of refugees in Falcon Scott. The deathly frost of that dark day had seeped into his bones.

But today was going to be different.

All the members of the cohort were here. Mordret was here, too… and a vast army of warriors from a distant realm, all seasoned veterans of the Nightmare Spell.

Sunny had grown much stronger, as well.

'We'll kill them both.'

Shaking off the momentary hesitation, he walked toward the black throne.

As he did, Sunny noticed something behind the dais. The throne

room was not entirely empty, after all… someone was standing there, frozen in the middle of looking up at the crumbling dome. A tall and elegant figure wearing ivory armor, which was tied at the waist with a burnt umber sash. Auburn hair, green eyes…

Sunny froze for a moment.

'Kai!'

So, this was where the Spell had sent his friend. Kai had been in the throne room all along, frozen in time and not even aware of what was happening around him. All the long months that had passed were like a moment to him.

Sunny did not even know whether to feel jealous or sad for his friend.

Looking away, he put his foot on the first step of the dais.

'Hang in there, buddy. I'll release you really soon…'

His essence was getting dangerously low.

Climbing on the dais, Sunny stopped in front of the black throne, unsure what to do. The first idea that came to his mind was to sit on it, like Daeron must have done when he held court in the past.

But, somehow, Sunny did not like that idea. He never aspired to be a king of anything, let alone of a city whose former king he had killed. Magnificent thrones were not really his thing… he was already plenty happy with his handy Shadow Chair.

'Ah, whatever.'

Feeling a sense of urgency, Sunny took a step closer and suddenly noticed a circular groove carved into the back of the throne. Its size and depth seemed just about right…

Cassie had destroyed the time enchantment of Aletheia's island by inserting the key into a slot carved into the Estuary fragment. Following an impulse, Sunny took off the Crown of Twilight and brought it to the circular groove.

As soon as he did, an invisible force pulled the band of dark metal out of his hand. The Crown fitted the groove perfectly, merging with the black stone of the throne. Luckily, its connection to his soul had not been cut — Sunny could still make use of its enchantments.

He also felt… a different, much vaster connection being established between his soul and something immense. The city itself, perhaps.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny looked up at the cracked dome of the palace…

And pulled on that connection, giving a mental command:

'In the name of Daeron, the Serpent King… in the name of Wind Flower of the Twilight Sea… and all those who have fallen… I, Lost From Light, order time to flow once more!'

For a few moments, nothing happened. The grand hall of the palace was just as still and silent as before.

But then, a loud sound tore the silence apart. It was the sound of a shard of stone falling on the floor.

Sunny turned swiftly and saw pieces of debris scattering across the marble tiles. His eyes widened when he realized the significance of what just happened.

Then, it was as though an invisible ripple spread through the world. The dust that had been hanging in the air, motionless, moved and danced in the rays of light. The shard of stone raining from the cracked dome of the palace plummeted down one after another, breaking against the marble floor.

A muffled murmur of the disastrous battle seeped through the stone walls of the palace, sounding like the rising sea.

'I… I actually did it.'

And then, something struck the dome with a deafening noise, making the whole palace shake.

Sunny felt claws of fear grasp his heart. Yes, he had indeed done it…

and now, it was time to face the consequences of what he had done.

There was an evil dragon right above his head right now, hellbent on slaughtering every human in Twilight.

There were also the members of the cohort lost somewhere on the streets of the city, a dreadful Mirror Titan, and an army of eerie warriors whose loyalty had to be won, somehow.

But first…

Tearing the Crown of Twilight from the groove cut into the black throne, Sunny put it on his head and hurriedly dashed toward the lone figure standing beneath the dais.

Kai was just now starting to move. He swayed a little and took a step back, stumbling over the first step of the dais. Before he could fall, however, Sunny caught him and started dragging him away from the throne.

The charming archer looked very confused.

"S—Sunny? What is happening? Are we in the Nightmare?"

Feeling the palace quake once again around them, Sunny cursed inwardly.

"Hey, Kai! Short version: yes, we are in the Nightmare. There is an evil version of you, who is an abominable dragon, trying to eat us right now. Don't worry, though! There is also an army of alien warriors from a destroyed world to help us kill you… him… the dragon! The rest of the cohort is also here, somewhere.

We got separated when a Corrupted Titan attacked us in the mirror version of this city, which was frozen in time. But now, I… thawed it, I guess…"

Sunny glanced at Kai and smiled.

"Oh! And also, Effie is pregnant."

The archer stared at him with wide eyes for a few moments.

"I know!"

Sunny almost stumbled.

"What? You know about the Plagues, the Twilight Sea, and the defensive array?"

Kai shook his head and outstretched one arm, summoning his bow.

"No… I mean, I know about Effie. She confided in me weeks ago. I have no idea what the rest of the things you said mean!"

Sunny stared at him incredulously, feeling hurt for some reason.

'So she told Kai, but she didn't tell me? Hmph!'

He couldn't help but say vindictively:

"Actually... I knew months ago…"

Which was still later than Kai, but technically true.

Kai gave him a strange glance, then opened his mouth to say something. But at that moment, Sunny froze.

Something… something was very strange about the palace.

It took him a moment to realize what had changed.

'Why is everything so quiet?'

The muffled sounds of the furious battle raging outside had disappeared at some point, plunging the world into eerie silence.

Sunny felt his hair stand on end.

He had a dreadful premonition... that they had made a terrible mistake, somewhere…

Chapter-1508: Unleashed

"Sunny? What is it?"

Kai must have read something from his expression. But Sunny did not know how to answer — he was suddenly in a state of mild panic, feeling like there had been a mistake in their plan. They must have misunderstood the situation, somehow.

But what was there to misunderstand? Twilight was besieged by the forces of the Defilement. In the middle of the battle, the Mad Prince had activated the defensive array, trapping Soul Stealer and the Dread Lord in frozen time… and, therefore, escaping from the clutches of his master.

The madman had also manipulated the events of this cycle to make sure that Sunny arrived at Twilight wearing the Serpent King's crown. He must have wanted the battle to resume… so that his future self, free of being enslaved to the Dread Lord, could turn its tide and destroy the tyrant of Verge.

…Right?

"I… don't know. Something is wrong."

Sunny gritted his teeth and pulled Kai to follow him, aiming to leave the throne room as soon as possible. They had to traverse the battlefield and find the other members of the cohort, first. Together, they would stand a much better chance of surviving the clash with the Defiled legion.

But before he could take another step, the palace shuddered, throwing both of them to the ground. There was a deafening rumble behind them, and the great hall was suddenly much brighter than it had been before.

A whole section of the dome shattered and collapsed, revealing the beautiful twilight sky above…

And the giant head of the harrowing dragon that had broken it.

Enormous chunks of stone fell down, burying the black throne beneath debris. Luckily, Sunny and Kai had already distanced themselves from the dais — otherwise, they would have been buried with it.

'Damnation…'

The Dread Lord's head passed through the breach, hovering in the air on his long neck. His eyes shone with starlight, full of sinister madness and malevolence. Then, the harrowing dragon pushed his enormous body inside, causing more of the dome to collapse.

A moment later, he landed in the throne room with a loud thud, and the palace shook once more.

…Strangely enough, though, it did not look as if the Dread Lord was chasing them. Instead, it almost looked as if he was escaping something.

Towering above Sunny and Kai, the dragon gazed at them and opened its maw, his porcelain fangs glistening in the dim twilight.

Sunny cursed inwardly and called upon his Shadows, at the same time summoning the Sin of Solace.

However, before he could…

A thunderous voice suddenly resounded in his mind, causing him enormous pain.

[STOP.]

And, following the Dread Lord's command…

Sunny halted, frozen in place. It was as if the dragon's words were the law, and he was unable to disobey.

'What… but, but the Shadow Bond…'

By his side, Kai was frozen still, as well. It was only then that Sunny realized that the Dread Lord had not used the Shadow Bond against him.

It was simply the authority of his voice. It was Kai's Ascended Ability, amplified and made more terrible by the dragon's Corrupted Rank.

Kai's power had always been more than a little bit sinister. The charming archer was a good and honest person by nature, so he only ever used it to inspire his allies and influence Nightmare Creatures. However, in the hands of someone less decent, it had the potential to produce truly terrifying results.

Being able to make anyone do anything — at least those of lesser Ranks than you — was very much like wielding absolute power over them. And power, as everyone knew, corrupted.

Sunny had always known that his friend's Aspect had a scary side to it. That was why he was not too surprised to learn that it was the gentle and caring Kai who had become the dreadful lord of Verge… with Kai's upright character destroyed by the curse of the Defilement, the insidious side of his Aspect would have had nothing to keep it in check anymore.

However, knowing and experiencing it himself were two different things.

'Curse it!'

Paralyzed by the dreadful command, Sunny kneeled in front of the towering dragon.

***

Somewhere else, on the devastated streets of Twilight, Nephis was released from the inescapable trap of frozen time. Disoriented, she fell and rolled, jumping to her feet a moment later.

All around her, the time shackles binding the warriors of Twilight were slowly coming undone. Their cold eyes were regaining the spark

of life. Their chests were beginning to rise and fall as they breathed for the first time in countless years. Their weapons glistened as they reflected the light of dawn.

Sunny was gone. Considering that the defensive array had been deactivated, he must have reached the palace already. Mordret of Valor was nowhere to be seen — he had returned to his physical body, which was lost somewhere in Twilight. Cassie, Effie, and Soul Reaper Jet had to be somewhere nearby, but she couldn't see them.

'We… we can still win this battle.'

Although the cohort had been separated when escaping Soul Stealer's mirror realm, their primary goal was achieved. Time had been unfrozen, and the warriors of Twilight were released.

Now, they just had to regroup, join forces with the defenders of the city, and overcome the invading legion of abominations. The battle would not be easy… it would be cruel and harrowing. Maybe even lethal.

But when had it ever been different?

Nephis took a step forward and hesitated for a moment, looking at the warriors around her.

Suddenly, she had an ominous premonition. Something felt wrong about the scene…

'I need to convince them.'

She was a stranger to these people. They did not know that countless years had passed since the start of the battle… that their king was dead, and that their world had long been destroyed. That challengers from an alien realm had entered the Nightmare, hoping to prevail where their predecessors failed.

But still, the Spell had a way of simplifying things. In its terrible world, there were humans, and there were Nightmare Creatures. Nephis might have been from a different world, but she was also a human… therefore, she was a natural ally simply by virtue of not being a Nightmare Creature.

Looking at the defenders of the city, Nephis pushed down the familiar, debilitating discomfort of talking to strangers and said, her voice bright and clear:

"Warriors of Twilight! I am…"

And then, something odd happened, forcing her to fall silent and grip the hilt of her sword.

…Countless people crowding the street all turned to look at her.

They did so with perfect synchronicity, their hollow eyes devoid of any emotion. Their eerie faces were calm and motionless. None of them said anything, simply staring at her in ominous silence.

Seeing herself reflecting in thousands of emotionless eyes, Nephis realized that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

She might have been a human... but these people were not. Not anymore.

A harrowing realization struck her like a bolt of lightning.

'They are... they are...'

They were Soul Stealer.

All of them.

Nephis finally realized her mistake... but, by then, it was already too late to change anything.

Chapter-1509: Stolen Bodies

The frozen battle they had witnessed was not a battle between the Defiled legion of Verge and the defenders of Twilight.

Instead, it was a battle between the Dread Lord and Soul Stealer.

The two Defiled Saints must have clashed as soon as the last true bastion of humanity in the Tomb of Ariel had fallen. Perhaps it was because they had needed each other's power before that. Perhaps it was because Soul Stealer had finally become capable of resisting the authority of the Dread Lord after devouring the souls and stealing the bodies of millions of humans in Twilight.

'Can it be his Transformation Ability?'

To split his soul into countless shards, all beholden to one sinister will. That would be a terrifying power in the hands of someone as devious as the forsaken Prince of War. He had already been insidiously dangerous due to his ability to slither into human souls and wear their bodies like costumes… what if Mordret of Valor could possess not one, but several stolen bodies at the same time?

Or millions of them, after becoming the Soul Stealer?

…Surrounded from all sides, with countless hollow eyes looking at her with an eerie lack of human emotions, Nephis took an involuntary step back. However, there were countless taken warriors standing behind her, as well.

There was nowhere to retreat. No path to salvation.

Except for the impossible one she could try and cut for herself.

She gritted her teeth.

'At least... Sunny... is not here.'

As numerous humans moved toward her, Nephis looked at them with cold resentment and unsheathed her sword.

***

Not too far away, Effie, Jet, and Cassie found themselves inside a half-collapsed building. The blind girl was the first one to regain her senses, catching the tall huntress before she could fall.

Pieces of rubble rolled on the cracked floor, the noise of their fall sounding thunderous in the eerie silence of the frozen city.

Although, by then, the city was not frozen anymore.

Out there, all around them, Twilight was beginning to stir.

Jet summoned her scythe, looking over the collapsed wall of the building. Beyond the rubble, on a narrow street, the figures of the stalwart defenders of Twilight were slowly coming back to life. There were no Nightmare Creatures nearby, only people.

But her expression was troubled, for some reason.

"...They're moving."

Effie regained her balance and followed Soul Reaper's gaze. A small smile appeared on her lips.

"Doofus must have reached the throne room, then."

She looked at the human figures outside.

"Those guys seem a bit weird though, huh? I guess it's only natural for people from a different world. Well, at least they're tough. Soft people don't survive… the Spell…"

Her voice gradually faded away, replaced by a tense silence for a moment.

"Why… are they staring at us like that?"

Before Effie could finish the sentence, a delicate hand appeared in front of her eyes, covering them. Cassie was standing on tiptoes, preventing her from looking at the warriors of Twilight.

Jet was slowly backing away.

Before the huntress could react, Cassie spoke in a grave and urgent tone:

"Effie. Take Soul Reaper and yourself into the locket. Now!"

Effie hesitated for a moment, but did not ask any questions. A moment later, her figure disappeared. So did Jet's. They were gone, safely transported to the idyllic meadow.

All that remained was an iron locket on a black cord, which fell to the ground. Before it touched the cracked floor, however, the cord was caught on the blade of a slender rapier.

Raising the Quiet Dancer, Cassie caught the locket and cautiously put it around her neck. Then, she turned to face the approaching figures.

Behind the silver half-mask, her beautiful blue eyes were cold and somber.

The tip of her rapier shook slightly, then moved, pointing at the emotionless humans.

***

Somewhere else, Mordret fell to the ground and gasped when his bloody stump hit the rubble. A pained groan escaped from his lips, then a stifled chuckle. Looking up, he observed the ruined street.

All around him, humans and Nightmare Creatures were being slowly released from the shackles of frozen time. Their weapons moved, their maws opened hungrily.

Blood flowed onto the cold stones once more.

Mordret remained motionless for a moment, looking upon the world through countless reflections.

Then, his eyes widened slightly.

"So that's how it is…"

An amused smile twisted his cracked lips.

Leaning on his sword, Mordret struggled to stand up and grinned when he felt countless eyes — and yet, only a single gaze — landing on him.

"Ah, how unfortunate."

All his Reflections had been destroyed. He only had a single soul core left, reducing his power to that of a mere Beast. His own Ascended body was missing a hand, while his best spare was nothing more than an Awakened squire with a modestly useless Aspect.

Truly, the circumstances couldn't have been worse.

Well… at least things wouldn't be boring. He had spent so many months… or was it years, already?... hiding from his Defiled self in complete solitude. Any kind of excitement was better than that dull existence, no matter how fatal it would turn out to be.

"Such wonderful odds. I feel refreshed!"

Smiling, he raised his sword and pointed it at the nearest warrior.

Then, his smile disappeared, replaced by an expression of cold contempt. His mirror-like eyes calmly reflected countless approaching figures, full of dark killing intent.

"I haven't had the pleasure of putting down repugnant things like you in a long, long time. Come, if you dare… let's see which one of us will be the last one standing."

Mordret took a step forward, as well.

***

Back in the Serpent King's palace, Sunny was kneeling on the marble floor, paralyzed by the dragon's command. The Dread Lord towered

above him and Kai, full of sinister malevolence.

Looking at the terrifying porcelain fangs of the Defiled Saint, Sunny felt a dark sense of foreboding.

'Curse it…'

Where were the warriors of Twilight? Why had they not stalled the damned Herald of the Estuary at all?

The battle had not even properly started, and he was already in such a desperate situation. Sunny could almost feel the shadow of death pulling him into its cold embrace.

He looked at the Dread Lord bitterly.

'At least Nephis is not here.'

Sunny was in a desperate situation… but not a hopeless situation, yet. There were still things he could do to try and get himself and Kai out of this predicament alive.

He just had to gamble with their lives and hope for the best.

Before he could, though…

A human figure suddenly appeared at the edge of the broken dome of the palace. And then another, and another.

The warriors of Twilight had finally caught up with the Dread Lord.

Chapter-1510: King's Resentment

Sunny could not even turn his head to take a better look at the humans that had appeared above the ruined throne room, standing on the edge of the collapsed sections of the dome.

At least he knew now that the army of Twilight was not gone. It was still out there, beyond the walls of the palace, fighting against the invading abominations.

Fighting against the Dread Lord and Soul Stealer.

'Thank the dead gods…'

He had no hope that these few warriors would be able to defeat the dreadful dragon — if they had the ability, there would have been no need to plunge Twilight into the eternal trap of frozen time, to begin with.

But they could at least distract the Dread Lord for a few moments, which would give him an opportunity to somehow rid himself of the command… perhaps. Once Sunny was free and reunited with the other members of the cohort, they would join the defenders of the city and help them slay the Defiled Saints.

He was already planning his next actions when something strange happened.

The people who had climbed the dome of the palace jumped down into the throne room without hesitation. Which wasn't that strange in and of itself… except for the fact that not all of them were equally powerful.

The few Masters among them landed easily, ready to attack the next

moment. The Awakened warriors were less graceful, crashing heavily on the marble floor.

Most frightening of all was that there were mundane humans among them, as well. The height of the dome was too great for them to survive the fall. They hit the floor with repulsive sounds, painting it with their blood. Dying senselessly.

'What… what are they doing?'

Witnessing the dreadful scene, Sunny felt horrified.

Dozens of people were emotionlessly jumping to their deaths, not even hesitating before taking the fatal plunge. It was so appalling, so meaningless…

So inhuman.

His eyes widened as a terrible suspicion surfaced in his mind.

As those of the warriors who were strong enough to survive the jump dashed forward to attack their enemy, the harrowing dragon simply swiped his tail, pulverizing their bodies into puddles of blood. A crimson haze spread through the dim twilight of the great hall.

Sunny was suddenly nauseated.

'Soul Stealer… those people… were taken by Soul Stealer…'

The strangeness that he had felt from the moment the cohort entered Twilight… the eerily emotionless faces of the defenders of the city… their cold, empty eyes…

The morbid revelations that Nephis had experienced moments before flooded Sunny's mind, forcing him to shudder — or at least try to. The Dread Lord's command held his body firmly in place.

'Impossible, impossible…'

There were millions of people in Twilight. How could Soul Stealer have possessed them all? What kind of monster could do that? What kind of conscience could control millions of puppets, reflecting false

copies of their souls?

He reeled, remembering the ghastly being they had seen in the mirror version of Twilight.

That being — the reflection of Soul Stealer's own twisted soul — had looked like a repulsive amalgamation of countless humans and Nightmare Creatures, all joined together into an abominable patchwork monster.

A demented, fractured monster like that probably could.

Sunny felt utter despair, but also a strong desire to curse.

'That goddamn Mordret… even when he's on our side, he's still such a disaster!'

How could a person be such a bad omen? Whenever the Prince of Nothing appeared, something utterly terrible was bound to happen!

'Calm down.'

There was no point in seething with anger at Mordret. There was no point in wondering how Soul Stealer could have devoured all of Twilight, or why he and the Dread Lord were fighting each other… none of that would help Sunny survive the current situation.

It was also not going to help him salvage that situation.

…But could it even be salvaged? Weren't all of them already doomed? The plan had been based on completely wrong information from the very start!

'No… we can still win, somehow.'

There had to be a way.

Sunny felt sick to his stomach and frightened for Nephis and the rest of his companions, who were lost somewhere out there, on the streets of Twilight, surrounded by the numerous bodies of Soul Stealer. Especially Effie, who was much more vulnerable to the insidious powers of the mirror wraith than the rest of them.

But he could not do anything about that, at least not now.

In fact, Sunny had his own dire problem to deal with.

The Dread Lord might not have been as utterly horrific as Soul Stealer, but he was still a foe far more dreadful than words could describe. And dealing with him… was now up to Sunny.

No matter what else happened, the tyrant of Verge had to die.

'I have to kill that fiend… I have to kill him, somehow.'

The Dread Lord had already dealt with the Soul Stealer puppets that had pursued him into the throne room, but more were pouring over the edge of the broken dome like morbid rain.

The two Plagues were fighting each other, which was good for the cohort. But their clash did not mean that Sunny and his companions would not be destroyed in the process… in fact, now that they were here in Twilight, they had become alluring tools for the Defiled Saints.

The Dread Lord was, without a doubt, capable of using his authority to turn them into deadly weapons against Soul Stealer. Soul Stealer, meanwhile, could empower himself even further by taking their bodies.

'Damn it all.'

The Dread Lord's authority… it was a manifestation of Kai's Ascended Ability. And Kai's Ascended Ability was a mental attack, of sorts.

Sunny already possessed a very high resistance to mental attacks, but that resistance was relative. It was enough, for example, to shrug off an order given to him by Kai — a fellow Master. But in front of a Defiled Saint, and one as immensely powerful as the Dread Lord, it had proved to be insufficient.

A complete immunity to mental attacks, however, was much less relative. In fact, it was closer to being absolute.

As fate would have it, Sunny possessed a Memory that could grant

them just that… albeit at a cost.

Unable to move, he used the Shroud of Dusk to send Kai a mental message:

[Kai… listen to me carefully.]

His friend did not move — he was unable to — but his response arrived shortly:

[...I'm listening.]

Sunny took a deep breath.

[When I start moving, think of me as an enemy. Don't get close. It… will be dangerous.]

With that, he sent his essence into the Crown of Twilight.

[King's Resentment] Enchantment Description: "This Memory grants the wearer complete immunity to mind attacks, but plagues them with irresistible wrath instead."

The next moment, Sunny felt the invisible shackles holding him in place shattering.

…And at the same time, he felt a fury so vast that it couldn't be described with words shattering his mind.

His thoughts were incinerated by the terrible, mad, boundless ire. He lost awareness of who he was, what he had to do, what he hoped to achieve. All he knew was that he had to destroy, kill, hurt, annihilate… everything. Everyone.

All of them!

'I'm… Lost… from Light…'

Some small vestige of his sanity remembered to utter his True Name, hoping that it would anchor his crumbling mind. But it didn't work. All it did was remind him of the tools he had at his disposal to visit utter devastation upon the world.

A low, bestial growl escaped from his mouth.

And then, a wicked smile appeared on his lips.

The Crown of Twilight… had another gift to give him.

A nearly endless amount of essence. Now that the defensive array was deactivated, nothing was draining his reserves anymore. It was all at his disposal…

Jumping forward, Sunny called upon the shadows, surrounding himself in a sea of them.

…Then, a giant serpent with black scales, clad in a fearsome onyx armor, emerged from the sea of shadows, murderous wrath burning in his mad eyes. Slithering across the ruined floor of Daeron's palace with stunning speed, the monstrous serpent created in his image lunged at the towering dragon and coiled himself around the winged horror's mighty body.

Without wasting a single moment, Sunny opened his terrifying maw and tried to sink his fangs into the Dread Lord's neck.

Chapter-1511: Drowning Star

Nephis saw the Serpent King's palace sway, from afar. Its dome was collapsing, and a net of cracks appeared on its walls. However, she had no time to pay attention to what was happening in the distance… the street she had found herself on was crowded with countless warriors, and all of them were moving toward her, an eerie emptiness hiding behind their ruthless eyes.

Hundreds of them. Thousands, even — and that was only on this one street. Enemies were in front of her, behind her, and on all sides.

There seemed to be no escape from this human flood. Their hands were already reaching toward her, aiming to catch her and push her down. Surrounded by the undulating mob, Nephis struggled not to surrender to primal fear.

Before the first hand touched her chainmail shirt, she took a stance and lashed out with her sword. The movement was ingrained into her very bones, absorbed by both her body and mind. Mass, speed, force, space and time. Levers and fulcrums… transfer of energy. That was what swordplay was, deconstructed to its most basic pillars.

Her body was a versatile and intricate tool for expressing these principles.

Of course, there was another element to it, one that existed outside the scope of fundamental physics. Thought. After all, the most perfect tool would be useless without a conscious will to guide it. And thoughts — both her own and those of her enemies — could become a tool, in turn. But that… was much harder to master…

The severed hand fell to the ground, bright blood spilling on the cobblestones. A normal human would have recoiled in terror, or at least showed a reaction. Even a Nightmare Creature would not have completely ignored the loss of a limb. However, the empty shell

hosting the perverse consciousness of Soul Stealer did not pay it any attention, continuing its lunge at Nephis.

She had calculated that the warrior would not be deterred, as well.

Shifting her weight, Nephis turned her torso and allowed the warrior to brush past her. At the same time, she gave him a measured shove. The man was already losing his balance, so that was enough to send him stumbling into the wall of people to her left.

Her sword had never stopped moving.

After severing the arm of the nearest human, she pierced the neck of another, then slammed the guard of the sword into the third, all in one fluid motion. By then, the hand she had used to shove the first warrior was already landing back on the hilt, giving her more leverage, and therefore speed.

And, therefore, freedom.

Nephis exploded into motion, shredding the bodies of the closest attackers like a hurricane of steel. A bright radiance suffused her skin, making it seem as though a merciless spirit of light was moving through the crowd of mortal warriors. One after another, their bodies seemed to melt in that light, severed and cut apart.

The white radiance was soon tinted red, shining through the bloody haze.

'Faster.'

Her mind was silent and clear, moving at incredible speed. She perceived a million details about her environment, seamlessly assimilated these observations into a comprehensive understanding, and instantly formulated flawless responses to the shifting landscape of the battlefield.

The silver longsword cut down anyone who entered within its reach, knowing no mercy or hesitation. Crimson blood was boiling and evaporating from its incandescent blade.

Nephis was alone, surrounded by thousands of enemies. However,

that was alright. Many of these people were Awakened, but most were mundane. They were much slower than her. Much weaker than her. Much more fragile than her… more than that, numerical advantage had a limit to how much it could help them — after a certain point, it did not matter.

The bodies of these warriors all took up a certain amount of space. Only so many enemies could attack her at the same time, obstructed from approaching her by the walls of the surrounding buildings and the bodies of their own comrades. So, it wasn't like Nephis had to fight with thousands of Soul Stealer's marionettes at the same time.

She only had to fight against a dozen or so at once, and those… those, she could kill.

But what did it matter?

She could kill a dozen. She could kill a hundred, a thousand… ten thousand, maybe. But she couldn't kill millions of them.

Sooner or later, she would grow tired. Her essence would run dry. Soul Stealer would send the more powerful Awakened and swarms of Masters to confront her. Warriors who could bulldoze through the walls of the buildings, destroying her only advantage, would appear, as well as those possessing insidious Aspects and arsenals of potent Memories.

In the end, she would be buried under a mountain of human flesh and torn apart.

'What do I do?'

Nephis cut down an Awakened warrior wielding a long spear, severed a mundane soldier in half, pushed through the rain of blood, and pierced the throat of a heavily armored swordsman. The enchanted plate armor could not stop her blade, parting in front of it like paper.

She kicked the swordsman's body, sending it flying back to crush and maim a dozen hollow-eyed warriors. There was only a split second remaining before she would receive a blow on her back — spinning around, Nephis sliced through the descending sword, the attacker's

arms, and his neck.

'What do I do?'

There were still thousands of enemies surrounding her… if anything, there were more of them now than there had been before. Despite the gruesome deaths of the first wave, their faces remained cold and emotionless. Their eerie eyes were full of emptiness and chilling malice. They were still advancing, aiming to bury her under an avalanche of bodies.

Nephis moved, knowing that she could not stay in place. She was faster than them, after all, and although a wall of steel and flesh surrounded her from all sides, her sword was sharp enough to cut it down.

She cut, pierced, and crushed. She calculated every move — both of her own and of her enemies — perfectly. She was ten steps ahead in her calculations, even, plotting a bloody course through the flowing mob in advance. That was the only way not to drown in the flood.

'What do I do?!'

Where was Sunny? Where was Cassie? What happened to Effie and Jet? Were they still alive, or had they already been taken as hosts by Soul Stealer? What about Kai? Had he escaped the trap of frozen time only to be devoured by the mirror fiend?

What about Mordret of Valor? What had happened to him?

Distracted by these thoughts, Nephis allowed the tip of an enemy's spear to strike her shoulder. The chainmail shirt held, but the cadence of her fluid sword dance was thrown into disarray, forcing her to scramble and recalculate dozens of movements.

What was she supposed to do?

Surrounded by thousands of enemies, Nephis looked ahead somberly. Then, furious white flames ignited in her eyes.

'Kill them all… I'll just kill them all. I'll try, at least…'

Her sword flashed, countless lives turning to ash in the incandescent glow of its blade.

Chapter-1512: Chaos and Mayhem

Somewhere far away, Mordret was in a similar situation. Of course, he did not possess the physical strength, speed, and resilience of Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan… however, he did possess his own arsenal of tricks.

'I wonder…'

He had escaped into a section of the city where the ground had been broken by some titanic blow. Shallow water covered the cracked cobblestones, with ruined buildings rising from it like islands. The twilight sky reflected in the water, turning it into a beautiful painting of soft colors.

Mordret was using the reflections to stay ahead of his pursuers.

Countless human figures were surrounding him, their weapons hungry for his blood.

'If I try to possess one of them, what would happen?'

Usually, he would have to bet his life against the soul of his victim, armed only with their reflected power. But these warriors had no souls — they had long been destroyed by Soul Stealer… that impostor. So, would Mordret have to battle against the soul of the Defiled Saint? Or the reflection of the dead victim's soul? Whose power would he be able to reflect?

He was both curious and reluctant to find out.

'Not just yet, at least.'

Dodging a swift sword, Mordret pierced the attacker's throat, dodged

another strike, and jumped back. A subtle frown appeared on his face.

'Inconvenient…'

The worst part about slaughtering these hollow vessels was that they were just that — vessels. There were no souls inside the bodies of the taken warriors, and so, he was not growing stronger from killing them. Otherwise, Mordret would have been able to slowly restore his Monster Core… maybe even the Demon Core, if he was diligent and lucky.

With those, he could create a new Reflection or two. Without them, things were proving difficult.

He would have preferred slaughtering actual people, instead.

'What was it that Sunless likes to say?'

He emotionlessly cut down a young woman wearing an archaic garment and sighed.

'Damnation?'

The ring of enemies surrounding him was growing tighter. He couldn't do much against them with one hand… all Mordret could do was flee. Stepping into the reflected sky, he appeared a few hundred meters away, in the middle of a furious clash between the vessels of Soul Stealer and a swarm of Nightmare Creatures that were still loyal to the Dread Lord.

'So, the impostor has a limit, too…'

Why hadn't Soul Stealer taken these abominations, as well?

Mordret smiled as he finished off a lumbering monstrosity. Finally, he felt his soul growing stronger.

Was it because destroying the souls of those already taken by the Defilement was harder? No, it wouldn't be… Mordret had slain plenty of Nightmare Creatures that way himself. So, it had to be because it was easier to destroy the souls of those who were not Defiled.

Why?

He lingered suddenly.

'Don't tell me…'

Was it because those following the Path of Ascension could be infected by the Defilement during the soul battle, all but dooming them to lose?

Suddenly, he lost all curiosity about facing Soul Stealer. Becoming Defiled? Mordret wanted none of that. Because it ran contrary to his goals, of course, but mostly because the impostor… was rather pathetic.

Sure, Soul Stealer was mighty. Sure, he had reached the level of power that Mordret struggled to fathom. However, he was also a bit brainless.

None of the warriors Mordret had killed showed a tenth of his skill with the sword. Gone were his cunning, his foresight, his resolve… and those were much more valuable than control over a million clumsy flesh puppets.

It seemed that Corruption — or perhaps splitting his soul between countless beings, both humans and abominations alike — had rotted Soul Stealer's mind, turning him into a madman. And not even a brilliant madman, at that, just a dull monster.

Mordret would have loved to continue pondering the undeniable inferiority of his monstrous twin, but at that moment, his sword failed to penetrate the carapace of another Nightmare Creature. He had killed a few already, using the rest to stall the Soul Stealer's vessels, but this one had turned out to be more powerful than he thought.

'Ah…'

As a sharp claw tore his chest open, Mordret grimaced and thrust his hand into the water. Then, he pulled a human body out of it — that of an Awakened warrior wearing the colors of Clan Valor.

The next moment, Mordret's eyes grew empty, while the warrior's eyes ignited with sinister intelligence. A moment after that, Mordret's own body plunged into the shallow water, disappearing from sight.

Wearing the familiar body of Squire Warren, and wielding his Aspect, he dove under the abomination's body and cut open its unprotected belly.

'A few more… a few dozen more… and I'll become a Monster again.'

Mordret dashed away, escaping before the dying Nightmare Creature crushed him with its weight. It was okay if Warren's body was destroyed — he had plenty more to choose from, some of which he had hidden from Changing Star and her cohort. He could take the bodies of these abominations, as well…

But what was the point?

As Mordret continued to coldly kill the Defiled, his expression grew dim.

So what if he killed them? So what if he regained a few soul cores?

The situation was still… inescapable. For once, he saw no way to survive, let alone win. Even his usual path of escape was cut off, since Soul Stealer was perfectly capable of haunting the reflections, as well.

'Are we all going to die here, in this godforsaken city?'

Wasn't it a bit too ironic? Poetic, even. To die by his own hand…

One thing kept Mordret's spirit up, though. It was that girl, Cassia… Song of the Fallen.

She might have had others fooled, but he knew that the blind witch was not as simple as she looked. Someone like her had to have something planned, without a doubt… she wouldn't have led her companions here otherwise.

But then again, Soul Stealer had gone through the same ritual as Mordret. Neither of them was easy to perceive through divination…

how else would that monster have escaped Torment's gaze and rebelled against the Dread Lord?

'Ah… I don't know.'

Mordret pushed an old man in weathered leather armor into the maw of a hideous Nightmare Creature, then pierced the creature's eye while it was busy devouring the poor fool.

His expression was somber.

'At this point, we'll need a miracle to pull through.'

But when had the world been generous with miracles? If something truly astonishing happened… it was always a curse, instead.

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Some distance away, Cassie had fled toward the breached walls of Twilight. Here, there were more Nightmare Creatures fighting against the vessels of Soul Stealer, and therefore, more mayhem and chaos.

Using that chaos, Cassie was still struggling to keep herself alive. Blood was pouring from a deep wound on her neck. Pressing her hand against it, she moved through the terrible jumble of human and monstrous bodies, somehow avoiding all the swords, claws, and fangs.

Sometimes, she was only a split second away from death, but each time, that split second was somehow enough to save her.

Her face was pale and bleak.

An iron locket rested on her chest, wet with blood.

'How much time do I have left?'

She didn't know exactly.

Far away, the Serpent King's palace shuddered, coming undone.

There, in the ruins of the throne room…

Sunny coiled his giant serpentine body around the Dread Lord, trying to crush his bones. His fangs were scratching the impenetrable midnight scales, leaving deep grooves on them.

'Die! Die, you worm!'

Losing all reason, he could only think about tearing the odious dragon apart.

…However, killing a Defiled Saint was not an easy task.

Chapter-1513: Furious Shadow

Sunny had transformed himself in the image of the Serpent King. However, he was not as powerful as Daeron. His onyx body was giant, compared to a human, but it was still much smaller than the Azure Serpent had been.

Much more importantly than that, it did not possess the power of a Great Beast. Sunny was merely an Ascended, after all, and even though the shadows he had used to form the onyx serpent were more powerful and ancient than him, the essence that had manifested them was that of a Master.

Six shadows were augmenting his shell, this time, but Nephis was not here to grant him the blessing of her flame… and although the Dread Lord was weaker than the Azure Serpent had been, the dragon was also not littered with gruesome wounds and nearing death.

None of it mattered to Sunny, though.

Consumed by frenzy, all he knew was the mad desire to rip his enemy apart.

'Kill you… I'll kill you…'

His fangs pressed down on the impregnable dragon scales, leaving deep grooves on their dark surface. His mighty body coiled tight around the Dread Lord, restraining and crushing him.

'I'll kill you no matter what!'

However, the harrowing dragon was full of ire and murderous will, as well. Even though his most dreadful power — the tyrannical authority of his voice — had proved to be futile when used against Sunny, he still had plenty of means to destroy the insolent slave.

A furious roar shook the dim throne room.

And, at the same time, an insidious whisper resounded in Sunny's clouded mind:

[ALL THAT EFFORT TO ESCAPE… AND YET HERE YOU ARE…]

Sunny vaguely realized that the Dread Lord was confusing him with the Mad Prince and doubled his effort to tear open the vile worm's throat. At that moment, however, his enemy finally moved.

Its tail whipped across the great hall once again, crushing countless Soul Stealer vessels. At the same time, he strained his wings against the coils of Sunny's giant armored body, causing cracks to appear on the surface of the Mantle.

Much worse than that, the Dread Lord lowered his head and bit into Sunny's own neck. His porcelain fangs pierced the onyx armor plates and sank into the shadows, tearing them apart.

It did not matter, though.

Hidden deep within the onyx serpent, Sunny let out a mad laugh. More shadows flowed from the open gate of the Shadow Lantern, mending the wounds delivered to his shell by the odious dragon.

He had plenty more hidden away, and his essence was nearly limitless here in Twilight. If the Dread Lord wished to win, he had his work cut out for him.

'I'll bleed you dry, one drop at a time…'

Finally, one of his fangs slid between two scales and cut into the tough hide beneath. Tasting blood… or maybe simply imagining tasting it with a tongue made of shadows… Sunny let out a triumphant growl.

Continuing to maul the shell's neck, the Dread Lord threw his massive body down. Tangled together, the dragon and the serpent rolled across the ruined floor of the throne room, making the whole palace shudder. The marble tiles were pulverized into dust, and countless hollow vessels were turned into puddles of shattered bones and

blood.

'...Is Kai alive?'

The thought flashed in Sunny's mind and disappeared. He did not care… he did not even really remember who Kai was. All he could feel was bloodlust and rage.

Crushed under the weight of the Dread Lord, his serpentine body was coming undone. His neck was shredded, and his head was moments away from becoming separated from his body. Even though he was mending the damage, the hateful dragon was tearing through the shadows faster than Sunny could manifest them.

But…

But he tasted the dragon's blood.

Sunny was full of dark glee.

His coils moved, a ridge of spikes growing from his spine. His body was like a circular saw now, sending clouds of sparks flying from the points where it ground against the Dread Lord's scales. More blood flowed, falling to the shattered floor like drops of silver flame.

Flame…

Letting go of Sunny's neck, the dragon pierced him with a loathsome gaze and opened his maw.

Hidden within the serpentine shell, Sunny gritted his teeth.

But what came out of the Dread Lord's maw was not a torrent of flame… instead, it was an eerie, melodious, otherworldly sound. It almost sounded like a song.

…And, enveloped by that harrowing song, the giant body of the onyx serpent shattered. Terrible cracks appeared on its surface, the shadows melting into a tenebrous haze.

A deafening sonic boom sent a hurricane of stone dust into the air, and Sunny was thrown away, his shell torn asunder. Freed from the

crushing embrace of his coils, the Dread Lord rose, his eyes burning with demented hatred. His gaze landed on the torn remains of the onyx serpent, searching for the human body hidden within.

As he was looking, though, a radiant arrow hit the side of his head. A fiery explosion bloomed, pushing the dragon's head aside.

Hovering near the cracked dome of the palace, Kai gritted his teeth and drew the string of his bow again.

The Dread Lord opened his maw, wanting to give the archer another command…

But at that moment, Kai screamed:

"Shut your mouth, you traitor!"

And, although the authority of his voice was not nearly powerful enough to restrain the Defiled Saint, the Dread Lord's jaws did freeze for a moment.

That moment was all Sunny needed.

The two parts of his severed body slithered across the shattered floor like snakes and connected, almost instantly growing back together. His ravaged head rose, baring its fangs, and sank them into one of the harrowing dragon's wings.

There, the scales were much thinner, and easier to pierce.

More Soul Stealer vessels were already pouring into the throne room. These were not as weak as the previous ones — very few of them died from the fall, which meant that there were much more Awakened and Ascended among them.

Kai let another arrow loose.

The Dread Lord looked around in fury and let out an infuriated growl.

Then, his wings moved, raising a hurricane.

The bastard… was trying to fly away.

Or so Sunny thought.

Unwilling to let the enemy go, he tried to hold on to the dragon's wing, but it was of no use. He was thrown aside, crashing heavily on the ground. The walls of the throne room were falling now, unable to withstand the battle of two giant beasts.

Soon, the whole palace was going to collapse.

Surrounded by hurricane winds and dust, the Dread Lord was rising into the air. He was already reaching the broken dome, ready to break through it and cause the entire thing to crumble.

Sunny looked up in fury.

'No, no, no! You won't escape!'

Coiling his massive body like a spring, he sent it flying into the air. His leap produced a shockwave that shattered the walls of the throne room and made the palace quake.

His head collided with the Dread Lord, sending the dragon crashing through the remains of the dome. But then, gravity pulled him down.

Sunny howled in fury.

And, responding to his wrath…

His tenebrous body flowed and shifted, changing form. Giant wings sprouted from his back and struck against the air, sending him flying up. Wreathed in darkness, a grotesque figure pursued the harrowing dragon into the sky.

A moment later, the six chitinous legs of a giant, monstrous butterfly made of shadows struck the Dread Lord's scales.

Chapter-1514: Burning Rust

The dome of the Serpent King's palace entirely collapsed, falling under its own weight in a colossal cloud of dust. Two enormous, dark figures rose from the cloud, vaguely visible as they tangled together in a furious struggle.

…Down on the streets of the city , Nephis was making her way to the crumbling palace. She was fighting against the human flood, the radiance of her skin shining brightly in the dim twilight of the early dawn. Her incandescent sword had turned into a blur, followed by a trail of crimson haze.

She had long lost count of how many enemies she cut down, how many bodies she sundered, and how much time had passed since the start of this nightmarish battle.

No matter how many vessels of the Soul Stealer she destroyed, their number never decreased. Instead, it only grew. More and more of them flooded from all sides, rushing to pierce her flesh with their swords, their spears, their arrows, their nails and teeth. Their power had grown, as well. There were more Awakened warriors surrounding her now, and more Ascended.

Their powers were like a constant hail that relentlessly assaulted her, lethal and unpredictable, growing more perilous with each step she took.

But something else grew with it, as well.

Her will.

Slowly but surely… Nephis was shaking off the burden of doubt that had covered her heart like rust, at some point. Little by little, its weight had added up, until she became pressed into the ground by it without even noticing.

Here, in the throes of this macabre slaughter, there was no place for doubt.

There was only combat. Steps, lunges, and feints. The movements of her sword, the movements of her body. The measured ruthlessness of her mind, the cold lethality of her skill. The empty eyes of her enemies, the perilous sheen of their weapons, and the inevitable moments of their deaths.

This was clarity. This was the stark world where only pain and will existed.

She was always tormented by harrowing pain. Pain burned everything away, leaving only will.

And Neph's will…

Was to kill them all.

She cut through countless humans, erasing them from existence with her sword. Their bodies came undone under its blade, forming a gruesome path. A river of blood flowed where she had passed, paving the way.

…Her blood was in that river, as well.

Nephis moved with dreadful speed and chilling precision, rending the flesh of her enemies like a radiant, flawless, fatal machine. Lifeless corpses fell to her feet — men and women, young and old. All severed and mutilated, their bodies gaping with horrible wounds.

But she wasn't unscathed, either.

Just then, an Awakened warrior used a strange Aspect Ability and bypassed the steel wall of her defense. His cleaver landed on her shoulder, biting into the chainmail. Her armor held, and her bones held, as well.

But the impact slowed her down, allowing an Ascended champion to ram a spear into her back.

The chainmail broke. The white tunic beneath it was pierced. The

spearhead plunged into her flesh.

Snarling, Nephis sent the Awakened flying with a kick and twisted, her sword cutting through the shaft of the spear and the Ascended's head. The bloodied spearhead dissolved into a rain of sparks, and the radiance suffusing Neph's skin dimmed a little.

Instead of blood, white flame flowed from the wound on her back, mending the torn muscles and broken skin.

A moment later, the wound was gone. Only the pain remained.

Nephis gritted her teeth, the same flame burning in her eyes.

'Come, all of you!'

She plunged into the frenzied mob, calling upon the fires of her soul.

Soon, a hurricane of incinerating flames spread through the human river, devouring all who could not resist it. Those who could were cut down by the spirit of light dancing in the midst of the blinding inferno, her sword merciless and unrestrained.

The distant palace drew nearer.

Nephis had unleashed the flames to burn her enemies, but she couldn't maintain the blaze around herself constantly. Her reserves of essence, no matter how deep, would run out too fast that way. In the end, she released the control of the flame, leaving a burning street in her wake.

The hungry fire spread, devouring the broken buildings.

The endless, relentless assault of the hollow-eyed vessels continued, unchanged.

More and more enemies broke through her defenses, leaving terrible marks on her body.

Her bones were broken. Her flesh was cut. Her armor became shattered and torn, full of holes… until it crumbled completely, disappearing into a whirlwind of sparks and leaving only a tattered

tunic to cover her radiant body.

A sharp sword slithered its way to her chest, piercing her heart.

Nephis swayed slightly and stared at the man who was holding the sword, a white inferno burning in her eyes.

Then, she reached with her hand and grabbed his throat, crushing it in an incinerating grasp.

The sword slid out of her chest, followed by a gust of flame.

At the same time, a battle axe landed on her shoulder, cutting deep, and a beak of a war hammer struck her head.

But no blood poured out of the fatal wounds. Only fire.

Nephis moved, severing the bodies of everyone around her. She did not fall, did not stagger. She did not even slow down.

If anything, it seemed as though she had become even faster, even brighter, even deadlier. Washed by the white flame, the harrowing wounds disappeared in the beautiful radiance.

Nephis was not going to die yet.

No… perhaps, she was only getting started…

Losing all restraint and not caring about the pain and the damage dealt to her body anymore, she lunged at her enemies, forcing them to reel back.

"I…"

Her sword tore through their bodies, leaving only death and scattering ash in its wake.

"Will show you…"

Terrible blows rained on her body, but all the gruesome damage they dealt was washed away by the white radiance.

"The horror…"

All around her, the streets of Twilight were being devoured by the spreading blaze.

"Of the Immortal Flame."

Nephis was like an undying, insatiable monster of flame that had taken the form of a slender young woman. Now that she had discarded her doubt and her fear, the true horror of her Aspect was finally unleashed.

No matter how her enemies cut and pierced her radiant body, nothing seemed capable of bringing her down. Her own sword, however, was like an incandescent omen of destruction and ruin, inevitable and inescapable, cutting down everything that stood in its way.

Countless lives were melting in front of her merciless blade.

Her mind was like a white void. Pain had become will. Will had become flame.

Doubt had become ash.

Nephis cut a road of blood and scorched bodies through the human flood, refusing to go down. Why would she? These swords, these spears, these arrows, these nails and teeth… she would withstand them all. Using her Dormant Ability did not diminish her essence, and so, she would continue to kill, and maim, and burn until Soul Stealer came in person to put a stop to her.

As long as there was fire, she would light herself on fire. She would endure its harrowing blessing. She would persist.

For now.

Of course, even the undying were not invulnerable. No one was. Nephis was going to make a fatal mistake, eventually. Fatigue and mental strain would accumulate, draining her strength away. Then, she would be caught and pinned down, or obliterated entirely.

But until that happened…

She would continue to burn.

Burn brightly in the dim twilight of the endless dawn.

Chapter-1515: Formless Shadow

High in the sky above Twilight, Sunny was being mauled by the Dread Lord. The monstrous butterfly shell he had hastily created was battered and torn, bleeding shadows into the air. The shadows dissipated into the beautiful radiance of dawn, disappearing.

He had spent months on Aletheia's Island, fighting against and being killed by all kinds of harrowing creatures. Of course, he had learned a lot about his killers during that time. The Hollow Butterfly was harder to fathom because it lacked a soul, though, and so its shell was rough and unstable.

Sunny did not care. All he cared about was hurting the hateful dragon.

His wings had long been broken, failing to regrow, so he clutched onto the body of the Dread Lord with his six sharp legs. His giant eyes were faceted, consisting of thousands of smaller ones, and so, thousands of harrowing dragons reflected in their dark surface, filling him with boundless rage.

His long beak had just pierced the Dread Lord's flesh in the spot where a few scales had cracked, mangling it.

'Ah…'

Sunny felt murderous joy.

Bleeding and hurt by that last attack, the dragon spread its wings. His maw opened, and another melodious call escaped from it, battering the monstrous butterfly like a devastating ram. Reeling from the shockwave of the following sonic boom, Sunny felt his shell falling apart and growled, mending it.

The Dread Lord was a step ahead, though. Before the damaged

butterfly coalesced back into a stable form, he tore two of its legs with his fangs, then broke another with his terrifying claws.

Sunny felt his grip on the odious dragon loosen.

'No… no! Come back here, you hideous worm!'

Blinded by pain and driven mad by the scent of blood, he laughed.

The massive body of the tenebrous butterfly rippled and then flowed, changing shape. Long tentacles shot from its carapace, wrapping themselves around the Dread Lord's wings and pressing them into his body. Soon, a revolting octopus-like abomination was clinging to him, tearing at his scales with a sharp beak.

Sunny had no wings anymore, and the dragon could not move his. They plummeted from the sky… slower than they were supposed to, considering that Kai — and, by extension, the Dread Lord — could fly even without wings. But still fast enough.

The moment the two of them hit the ground, shattering a dozen buildings and sending cracks running through the carapace of the inconceivable carcass Twilight stood upon, Sunny was thrown off the body of the dreadful dragon.

He rolled away, his shell already shifting. By the time the Dread Lord rose, a giant leopard of decaying flesh was already lunging at him, aiming to bite into his throat.

Their frenzied battle continued.

When they fought on the ground, Sunny assumed the form of a land predator. When the Dread Lord tried to rise into the sky, he assumed the form of a flying monstrosity. When the dragon threw him underwater, he turned into the onyx serpent, relentlessly attacking his loathsome enemy in the murky depths.

He was crazed and relentless, but his enemy was both powerful and vicious. Even robbed of his most insidious weapon, the Dread Lord was still a harrowing foe. His mighty body, his sinister mind, and his profane voice were all fearsome, capable of visiting unimaginable devastation upon the world.

Sunny was suffering much more than the odious dragon, his shadow incarnation receiving more and more soul damage despite being hidden inside an armored shell. But the dragon was hurting, as well. Although the wounds littering his body were not deep, they were numerous, seeping with silver blood.

And that… was all Sunny wished for.

'Bleed for me, worm…'

There was an annoying fly trying to intervene in their battle, hovering around them and sending one arrow after another at the Dread Lord. That fly wanted to steal his vengeance from him, and so, Sunny swiped at it with his claws, sending the pest plummeting down. It soon returned, though, drowning him in rage.

'Just wait a little… I'll kill you too…'

Everyone… he was going to kill everyone!

But the dragon would be first.

Even if Sunny had to rip his own soul apart to murder the loathsome worm, he would see him dead.

'Die! Die! Die!'

Even with nearly endless reserves of essence and the boundless fury of the [King's Resentment] fueling him, Sunny was struggling to deal severe damage to the Dread Lord. He vaguely remembered that there was someone else he had to kill… a vile amalgamation of countless beings hiding in the reflections… but he couldn't even slay this winged fiend!

Indignant, Sunny broke through the barrier of corpses floating in the water and slithered onto one of the carcasses. Before he could even change his shape, the harrowing dragon bit into his shell, tearing it, and dragged him into the sky. Four sets of terrifying claws slashed at him, shattering the onyx plates of the shell and maiming his serpentine body.

A hateful voice boomed in his head, making him dizzy:

[YOU HAVE RETURNED TO THE SOURCE. I SEE. SHE IS BACK TOO, THEN…]

Ripping into the crumbling shell with his maw, the Dread Lord laughed.

Laughed at him.

Sunny roared in fury.

[SHALL WE KILL HER AGAIN? YES… I WILL DEVOUR HER. RIGHT AFTER I'M DONE WITH YOU.]

Nephis. He was talking about Nephis.

Deep in the crumbling embrace of his shell, Sunny went absolutely mad.

Forgetting everything else except for his rage, he allowed the shell of the onyx serpent to dissolve into a torrent of shadows, and escaped their embrace.

Landing on the shoulder of the harrowing dragon in his fragile human form, Sunny grasped the hilt of the Sin of Solace and plunged it between the impregnable scales.

…Or at least, he tried to.

As if sensing the cursed blade, the Dread Lord finally showed a reaction. The massive body of the dragon recoiled, sending Sunny flying.

He fell through the air with terrible speed, plummeting down, down… there were no shadows for him to safely land into.

Before Sunny was splattered against the cold stones, someone caught him, slowing his fall. The two of them hit a stone wall and shattered it, rolling into the courtyard below.

Sunny landed on something soft and bounced away.

"Argh…"

Leaning on the Sin of Solace, he rose and looked around with bloodshot eyes. The weathered corpses… the battlements… he knew this place.

He was back in the floating fortress where Mordret had welcomed them to Twilight.

'So... the worm is afraid of my sword.'

A twisted grin appeared on his lips, and Sunny finally noticed another figure struggling to stand up from the cold stones near him. It was that annoying fly…

Killing it would only take a split second.

Before he could do it, though, a massive shadow covered him. Then, the battered dragon landed on the wall of the fortress, crushing the battlements with his claws. With silver blood streaming down his midnight scales, the Dread Lord gazed down at him, starlight burning in his malevolent eyes.

His gaze shifted slightly, crushing down on the annoying fly like an invisible force.

[YOU…]

Chapter-1516: Consuming Wrath

Using the fact that the loathsome dragon had been distracted by the fly, Sunny considered his enemy for a moment. His mind was aflame with insatiable anger, so it was hard to think… hard to stay still and contemplate the way to kill his enemy better, even though that was his one and only goal.

Somewhere deep down, Sunny knew that he had surrendered his most lethal weapon — his cunning — to the scorching temptation of wrath. But that thought, too, was obliterated by the ocean of boundless rage.

'That worm is strong.'

Sunny had called upon his most primal, most destructive power — the Shadow Shell. He had ravaged the Dread Lord as a ferocious sea serpent, a dreadful butterfly, a decaying leopard, and many more revolting shapes. His attacks had dealt some damage to the enemy, but none of them had made the dragon reel.

The only thing that had was the Sin of Solace.

Sunny glanced at the beautiful jade jian.

'He knows that sword.'

The Mad Prince had wielded the Sin of Solace, and so, the Dread Lord would be familiar with the sinister power of the cursed blade. Even if it had never been used against him, he would know and fear it.

That was because while Sunny could mutilate the dragon's flesh, the Sin of Solace could shatter his mind. It had been created from the

whisper of Ariel, the Demon of Dread, after all.

And there was no one more familiar with the terror of Ariel's secrets than the Dread Lord, who was similarly burdened by the knowledge of truth due to his Flaw.

There was a problem, though…

Sunny could only wield the Sin of Solace in a human hand, but his human body could be destroyed by one bellow from the dreadful dragon.

Or maybe not.

Grinning madly, Sunny dismissed the jade jian. At the same time, he called upon the shadows once again. They surged from the open gate of the Shadow Lantern, enveloping him like a dark tide.

And then, a towering figure rose from that tide.

This time, Sunny did not create the shell of a serpent, a butterfly, or a fearsome leopard. Instead, he borrowed a page from the Devouring Beast's book… and created the shell that was a perfect replica of himself, only on a much larger scale.

Of course, he couldn't compete with the feral Plague, who had stood a hundred meters tall. But even at a third of her height, his head still rose above the battlements of the fortress.

A furious dark giant made of shadows appeared in the middle of the courtyard, sharing Sunny's appearance. His towering body was covered by a cracked onyx armor… and a whirlwind of sparks surrounded his outstretched hand.

Memories were mystical tools. They were created from the soul essence of their wielder, and adjusted to suit the wielder's body. That was why Awakened did not need to fit and tailor their armor, or mold the hilts of their weapons to their grip.

However, things changed once an Awakened reached Transcendence. The body of a Saint could transform, taking an entirely different shape. It was only then that the limit to how much a Memory could

be adjusted to fit its wielder revealed itself.

Different Memories had different limits. Some could still be used by the transformed Saints, some could not. Generally, the more powerful a Memory was, the more flexible potential it possessed.

And Sunny was willing to bet that the Sin of Solace, a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, possessed more than enough of it to be useful in the hands of a giant — especially because the form he had taken was only different from his own body in size, and therefore did not require the jade jian to stray away from its nature as a sword.

All he had to do was pour more essence into manifesting it. Ten times more, a hundred times more, a thousand times more… it did not matter. Sunny's essence was inexhaustible right now.

As the shape of a graceful sword, its blade dozens of meters long, started to manifest itself from light, Sunny grinned and dashed forward. It was going to take the Sin of Solace some time to weave itself into existence, and he would have to occupy the loathsome dragon until then.

Struggling to control his massive body, Sunny leaned forward and rammed his shoulder into the wall of the courtyard. The entire fortress quaked and tilted, water pouring in through the broken gates. The wall itself cracked and collapsed, forcing the Dread Lord, who had been using it as purchase, to lose balance.

Before the dragon could open his massive wings, Sunny grabbed onto him and pulled him down. His face was very close to the Dread Lord's bloodied chest… if not for the visor of the onyx helmet, Sunny would have tried to bite into his throat.

'What's this…'

Something glistened amidst the silver blood. There, between the midnight scales, was a scale that seemed different from all the others. It was dull grey, as if forged from iron, and had a peculiar shape.

Sunny tried to get a better look at it, but at that moment…

He heard the annoying fly shout:

"S—sunny! I… I can't…"

'What...'

And then, a radiant arrow hit him in the back, slid into the crack of the Mantle, and detonated inside.

'No!'

The left side of the shadow giant's torso exploded from within. His onyx armor, which had already been severely damaged, crumbled into pieces. His left arm, which had almost grasped the hilt of the Sin of Solace, fell to the ground.

At the same time, the dragon's maw closed on his neck, shredding it. The Dread Lord growled, tearing the giant's head off with a terrible pull.

Blinded by terrible pain and disoriented, Sunny crashed on the cold stones.

His shell fell apart, and he was banished from the embrace of shadows.

His body rolled and came to halt in the rubble of the shattered fortress wall. He felt cold water licking his torn skin.

'Ah…'

The fly… he should have killed it sooner. The loathsome dragon must have whispered a command into the vermin's ear...

Letting out a pained groan, Sunny forced his battered body to rise — only to see the Dread Lord's tail swiping at him with terrible speed. Remembering how the hollow vessels of Soul Stealer exploded into bloody mist after being struck by it, he let out a hateful scream and stepped into the shadows.

A moment later, he appeared on top of the crumbling wall.

From there, Sunny could see the courtyard, and the figure of the bleeding dragon below him. He could also see Twilight in the

distance, barely visible through the haze of dawn.

'What to do, what to do…'

Belatedly, he thought about his Shadows. Saint, Fiend, Nightmare… they could help him a lot in this battle. Especially Saint, who was immune to all mind attacks and could resist the authority of the Dread Lord.

But thinking about them filled him with endless fury.

No one was allowed to steal his vengeance from him… no one! Summoning the Shadows would only give them a chance to kill the odious dragon before he could.

He would never allow that to happen.

'This… this is madness!'

A feeble thought was drowned by the torrent of bloodlust and demented anger. Sunny was not going to allow anyone to steal his victims. No… if he summoned the Shadows, it would only be to kill them. Kill them all! In fact, it was exactly what he should have done.

Each of them was a Shadow Creature, and a powerful one at that, suitable to become fuel for his soul. He had painstakingly nurtured them himself, after all. So, wasn't it only right, for him to reap what he had sown? Just imagining the flood of shadow fragments he would receive from slaughtering his servants made Sunny smile viciously.

Was that how the Mad Prince had become a Titan? It had to be. Where else would the vile madman find enough fragments to form the seventh core, here in the Tomb of Ariel? Sunny would be wise to follow his example.

But first, he had to kill the dragon.

And the traitorous fly...

Turning his head to look at his enemies, Sunny lingered for a split second.

Out there, far away… wasn't something strange happening in Twilight?

Suddenly frozen, he looked into the distance.

Chapter-1517: Supernova

On the crumbling streets of Twilight, a grotesque Nightmare Creature was mauling another with its fangs, while a rain of swords and spears fell on its tough hide. Each strike caused streams of fetid blood to pour out of ghastly wounds, but the abominations paid it no attention.

'Ah… it hurts.'

Mordret, who had taken the body of the Nightmare Creature, was not having a great time. Not only was he being cut and mangled by the vessels of the impostor, but it was also getting hard to breathe. The air was full of smoke, and the buildings around him had caught fire, at some point.

But he was so close…

Finally, the abominations he had been brutalizing shuddered and died. An ethereal stream of power flowed into his soul, and he fled into the reflections, escaping the cruel blades of the hollow vessels.

Appearing a few hundred meters away from the pursuing mob, he left the dying body of the battered Nightmare Creature and returned to his own. Before too long, a familiar pain tore apart his soul, forcing Mordret to groan.

'Why… does it have… to be so unpleasant?'

A new core was being born in the depths of his soul. He was becoming a Monster once again.

'This will give me some breathing room.'

The human flood was already surrounding him, seemingly endless. Mordret had only a few seconds of reprieve before the puppets of

Soul Stealer would assault him again.

His perception spread far and wide, jumping between countless reflections to observe the world.

He saw Song of the Fallen, the blind witch.

He also saw a giant made of shadows wield a jade sword against a harrowing dragon… Sunless, the madman, was fighting against the Dread Lord.

Nightingale was there, as well, kneeling near a puddle of water.

At that moment, Mordret's eyes glistened, and a sinister thought entered his mind.

'Can I?'

He hesitated for a moment, unsure. But then, a dark smile twisted his lips.

'Well, even if I fail, it will at least be entertaining.'

Mordret moved, contemplating how much essence he had left. Reaching the distant fortress would be a challenge...

But then, he was distracted from these calculations.

That was because he saw something else.

Turning toward the heart of the city, Mordret froze for a moment.

His eyes widened slightly.

***

Cassie leaned against a broken wall, clutching her mangled neck. Her armor was slick with blood, and she felt weak. Her beautiful face was pale and tired.

"Go."

The Echo of the slain sybil floated away, the hem of her red dress

hovering above the cobblestones. She was going to buy her master some time to escape, and then drown in the flood of hollow-eyed warriors.

Sighing, Cassie pushed herself off the wall and continued to flee. She dodged and evaded the Nightmare Creatures that lunged at her from the ruins, not bothering to retaliate. There was no time for it.

The lives of Effie and Jet were hanging in a fragile balance… they were literally hanging from her neck, hidden in an iron locket. That locket pressed her down with the weight of a mountain.

She couldn't allow herself to make mistakes.

'I must escape.'

Making another turn, she came to a halt in front of a devastated space.

Behind her was the tide of pursuing warriors, all staring at her with those eerie empty eyes of theirs.

In front of her… were the broken gates of Twilight. Beyond them, there was nothing but still water.

There was nowhere else to run.

Cassie let out a quiet sigh.

Turning around, she lowered her bloodied hand and unsheathed the Quiet Dancer. The slender rapier glistened in the light of dawn, pointing at the approaching puppets of Soul Stealer.

She gritted her teeth.

"Come, then."

'It's time.'

***

...In the heart of Twilight, Nephis finally reached the Serpent King's

palace.

The palace was no more. It had collapsed, at some point, turning into a vast ruin. Blood flowed between the shattered stones.

The Dread Lord was not here. Sunny was nowhere to be seen, either.

She was late.

A heavy sigh escaped from her lips.

Behind Nephis, Twilight was wreathed in white flames. In front of her, a dozen warriors stood motionlessly, surrounding a monstrous figure in a tattered vermilion cloak.

If not for his mirror-like eyes, she would not have recognized Mordret of Valor… Soul Stealer. His original body.

Nephis stared at the monster silently, an incandescent void shining through her eyes.

Then, she took a step forward.

Her armor had long crumbled. Her white tunic was torn and cut, revealing the soft radiance of her skin. Even her sword was covered by a net of cracks, ready to shatter into a whirlwind of sparks.

She was tired.

"Found you."

Nephis walked toward Soul Stealer, and the figures surrounding him moved to meet her. At the same time, thousands upon thousands of human vessels were pouring from the burning streets, surrounding her. There was no end to them.

She had killed so many… but no matter how many she killed, the flood of bodies never ceased. It only grew.

'I…'

The first figure reached her, summoning a long spear.

Nephis raised her sword and met its strike. The second figure was already lunging from the side… the third, the fourth… she tried to block, evade, and deflect them all.

A few moments later, her sword broke.

Even then, Nephis continued to move forward. Step after step, wound after wound, she slowly, torturously made her way toward Soul Stealer.

She almost made it.

There were only a few meters left between her and the monstrous creature now… but those several meters were like an insurmountable abyss.

Pushed down, Nephis fell to her knees. Seven spears were piercing her radiant body, nailing it to the ground. She couldn't heal these wounds until the spears were gone, but those holding them had no intention of retrieving their weapons.

Impaled on them and held down, Nephis couldn't move.

Sensing a movement ahead, she raised her head and looked at the approaching monster. Her radiant image was reflected in his mirror-like eyes.

Soul Stealer stopped a couple steps away, looking down at her with an empty gaze. His pale lips twisted into a strange smile.

"Sis… ter…"

His inhuman voice sounded like shards of broken glass.

Nephis looked down.

The radiance suffusing her skin dimmed a little. A tormented sigh escaped from her lips.

Kneeling... just like she had at the end of the Second Nightmare... Nephis said:

"I came into this world… as a sharp blade…"

She raised her head slightly and looked at the monstrous creature with a tired gaze.

"But with every step I took, my edge was dulled."

Her face slowly became impassive, devoid of all emotion. Her voice was like a whisper.

"I've made compromises, learned how to act reasonably, and forced myself to move with restraint."

Nephis took a deep breath and remained silent for a moment.

When she spoke again, her voice had grown steady and loud. A hint of an indescribable emotion appeared in her radiant eyes.

Glaring at the monstrous creature, she said:

"...I am tired of compromises. I am tired of being reasonable. I am tired of being restrained."

Nephis looked into the eyes of Soul Stealer, furious flames igniting in the depths of her own.

"I... am Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan."

Her gaze was suddenly full of cold contempt. Her even tone trembled with incinerating passion.

"Who dares to stop me?"

And when she spoke those words, the soft radiance suffusing her skin exploded with brilliant light.

A hurricane wind rose, stirring the fire devouring the streets of Twilight. The seven spears impaling Nephis to the ground caught aflame, melting in its scorching white heat.

Although it seemed impossible, the blinding light emanating from her incandescent figure grew even more intense, unbearable to look at.

If Sunny was there to see Nephis, he would have witnessed her six radiant soul cores swelling with furious light.

He would have also seen one of them becoming covered by a net of fiery cracks.

…Soul Stealer moved, reaching forward, but he was too late.

In the next moment, all the flames burning across the ruins of Twilight were suddenly absorbed by the incandescent figure kneeling in front of him.

For a split second, the world was still and silent.

There was a whisper.

And then, everything dissolved in white radiance.

Chapter-1518: Ruin

Standing on the crumbling wall of the floating fortress, Sunny saw the light grow dim above Twilight. For a moment, everything was still.

And then, the entire world was suddenly drowned in white radiance, blinding him.

Stunned, he raised a hand to cover his eyes and saw a pristine star ignite in the heart of the distant city. It swelled, growing into a massive sphere of furious flame.

Everything happened in an instant.

The buildings nearest to the white star simply dissolved in its pure light, evaporating. Those further away exploded into dust and were erased from existence by an obliterating shockwave. Those behind them were flattened and melted, turning to ash from the immolating heat.

A wave of incinerating fire, taller than the towering walls of the city, spread outward at lightning speed, consuming everything in its path — buildings, trees, cobblestones, even air itself… and all the tiny human figures flooding the crumbling streets.

Behind it, the furious star rose and deformed, slowly turning into a mushroom cloud of incandescent white flame. The pillar of fire supporting it dwarfed everything, reaching toward the sky.

'W—what…'

Even driven into madness by fury, he was momentarily paralyzed by the harrowing splendor of that inconceivable sight. Twilight... Twilight was being destroyed in front of his eyes.

…That was when the invisible shockwave reached the fortress, shattering its walls and throwing him down.

The deafening roar of the explosion came next, shaking the world.

Sunny plummeted from the broken wall and hit the cold stones with a sickening sound. Bouncing off the hard surface, he rolled and then instinctively covered his head with his hands. In the next moment, a rain of stone debris fell down, pummeling him like crushing hail.

'Who… who dares…'

Deaf from the cataclysmic roar of the blast, he screamed furiously and tried to stand up. Something hit him on the head, but Sunny did not care. Hunched, he rose from the ground and peered into the dust that had enveloped everything around, searching for the massive figure of the dragon.

So what if all of Twilight was devoured by flame? So what if it seemed like the sky had been shattered and fell down?

He was still going to kill the hateful worm…

'...Why is it so dark?'

The colossal pillar of flame had reached the heavens and collapsed on itself, torn apart by the wind. The furious light of the pure white star had dimmed and disappeared, plunging the world into darkness.

A vast cloud of ash rose into the air and obscured the seven suns, turning the twilight of dawn into a lightless gloom of dark devastation.

***

Far away, in the scorched desert that had been Twilight, ash fell from the sky like snow. In the heart of the ruined city, nothing but darkness remained. Even the air itself had been burned away by the inconceivable heat of the obliterating explosion, and so there were no flames burning on the blackened stones.

The only source of illumination in that dark abyss was a radiant

figure that stood amidst the destruction, surrounded by ash and ruins. It was slowly coalescing back into the shape of a beautiful young woman from pure light.

Her brilliant skin did not have a single blemish on it, and her shining hair flowed like incandescent silver, emanating a blinding white radiance.

Her pristine light reflected in the boiling water, creating a small island of light in the sea of searing darkness. Twilight was still and silent, with nothing but water moving on its vast, smoldering expanse.

The numerous human bodies of Soul Stealer were all gone, devoured by the merciless flames and turned to ash.

The Nightmare Creatures who had battled against them were gone, too.

Only Nephis remained, illuminating the darkness with her light.

…And because she was the only one left, the indestructible reflection of the sinister mirror fiend had nowhere to go but into the depths of her radiant, harrowing eyes.

***

Nephis was standing on the surface of a calm ocean. The world around her was suffused with sunlight, and the perfectly still water below her bare feet glowed beautifully, reflecting the brilliance of heaven.

It was as if she was standing on a sea of golden clouds, awash in breathtaking light.

Seven suns shone brightly above her head.

She looked at them impassively.

She had felt the terrible agony of one of her soul cores — the Terror Core — destroying itself before. But so many Defiled abominations had been consumed by the unleashed flames of her soul that it was

reformed anew.

With it, the seventh core was born.

The last core.

The pain of its creation had already passed, and Nephis was a Titan now.

She looked away from the seven suns and gazed silently at the only spot of dirt and darkness in her perfectly radiant world. Out there, some distance away, a repulsive creature stood, staring at her with mirror-like eyes.

It did not look like a human, nor did it look like a Nightmare Creature. Instead, it was like a revolting amalgamation of countless people, countless abominations, all joined together into a monstrous patchwork being that shifted and changed form with every move, every breath, every moment that passes.

The shifting monster towered above her, staining the pure waters of her soul with darkness and corruption.

Soul Stealer grinned, reaching forward with countless hands.

He called her name with countless voices.

His countless eyes festered with hatred and greed.

But also fear.

Nephis looked at him with contempt.

Her even voice echoed across the radiant expanse, uttering a single word:

"...Burn."

And then, the beautiful landscape of her soul changed.

The water Soul Stealer stood upon was no water at all. Instead, it was liquid flame, as if he was standing on the surface of a furious white

star. The golden clouds floating above him were not vapor, but incandescent gas, as if he was drowning in burning stardust.

Most harrowing of all, though, was the light of the seven suns.

Because here in the sea of Changing Star's soul, there was no escape from their incinerating rays.

The radiance of the seven suns swelled, turning the calm ocean into an incandescent white void.

And, trapped in that merciless void... Soul Stealer burned.

Chapter-1519: Reverse Scale

The floor of the floating fortress was tilted, and Sunny could hear the sound of water rushing into the breaches. His sight was obstructed by the cloud of dust, so he closed his eyes and sensed a massive figure stirring in the darkness.

He grinned, forgetting about how torn and battered his body was.

Looking up, Sunny saw two cold silver stars burning in the darkness high above him — the eyes of the murderous dragon, gazing down upon him.

The dragon moved, and at the same time, the shadows moved, as well.

The drowning fortress shuddered.

***

Slumped near a puddle of water, Kai gasped for air. He was suffering from terrible pain and struggling to breathe… that blow Sunny had delivered him before was not a light one. He suspected that several of his ribs had been cracked or broken. His muscles were torn, as well, so drawing the bow was a torment.

'This… really is a Nightmare.'

More than anything, Kai felt lost and confused.

The battle the government forces were supposed to observe had already been a disaster. The terrible journey through the merciless white desert was like a feverish dream. Before he knew it, they were standing in front of a towering block of black stone, preparing to enter a Seed of Nightmare.

Kai had thought that he had prepared himself mentally for the dreadful trial of the Spell, but he had been wrong. Coming to his senses in the dim throne room of a mysterious palace was unlike anything he had ever expected... and much more terrible.

Sunny was there, pulling him away from the falling debris. He heard some outlandish things about an evil dragon, who was also his twin, and an army of alien warriors that were supposed to help the cohort. A few moments later, the dark dragon was in front of them, commanding them to kneel.

Kai knew that Sunny never lied, of course. But hearing that voice and feeling the irresistible authority contained within it, he fully realized that it was all true…

The abominable dragon was, indeed, a copy of him. A much more powerful, vile, and Corrupted version of Kai, who had betrayed his friends and was now trying to kill them.

How could he turn on Sunny, Effie, Cassie, Nephis, and Colonel Jet?

Kai did not know, but the truth was undeniable.

Learning that truth hurt much more than having his ribs broken.

Things had moved very fast from that point, not giving him an opportunity to process the bitter revelations and make sense of what was happening. Sunny warned him to stay away and suddenly turned into a giant serpent, attacking the dragon furiously.

Had his friend somehow become a Saint, already? Kai did not know.

Why did he have to stay away? He did not know that, either.

There were many things Kai did not understand, but then, there was no real need to. At the core of it, the situation was clear — the cohort was up against a dreadful foe, and the lives of his friends were hanging in balance.

That was why Kai tried to help Sunny fight the dragon, as best he could.

The three of them rose into the sky, and he saw a strange city built on a vast island, illuminated by the light of seven rising suns. The streets of the city were flooded with people. Those people were fighting against a legion of Nightmare Creatures, but somehow seemed more sinister than the abominations they fought.

Kai only caught a glimpse of them, though, engrossed by the battle against the vile dragon… against himself.

Sunny seemed to have lost his mind, for some reason, shifting between the forms of various harrowing creatures. Consumed by fury, he wasn't able to differentiate between friend and foe. That was how Kai ended up being battered and suffering grievous wounds from his own friend… he should have listened to Sunny's warning better.

But even if he had, he wouldn't have left Sunny to fight against the abominable dragon alone.

Eventually, the three of them ended up away from the city, across the vast expanse of water littered with dreadful corpses, in the ruins of a fallen fortress. There was a bright flash, and the deafening roar of a distant explosion. And now, Kai was surrounded by darkness.

Cold water was licking his skin.

'Ah…'

Using his Awakened Ability, Kai could see through the darkness. He could also see through the billowing dust, and even through the stone debris. All around him, the world had gone mad.

The shadows were surging, turning into numerous dark hands. Those hands, each possessing seven fingers, tore at the dreadful dragon with sharp claws. At the same time, Sunny was trying to build another giant around himself, his attempts failing time after time.

The dragon seemed wary of the enormous white sword that lay on the cold stones, partially buried in rubble, and so destroyed the giant ruthlessly, each time, before it could take shape.

Slowly but surely, Sunny's body became tattered and broken. Even though he did not bleed, Kai could see that his condition was

deteriorating swiftly.

Sunny did not seem to care, consumed by the strange derangement, but Kai did.

'I have to do something…'

Even though Kai was not as powerful as his friends, he was not at all weak. He was an Ascended, too… he had led soldiers into battle and killed dreadful Nightmare Creatures, survived impossible odds, and triumphed where most other people would have perished.

He had burned alive in the dragon's flame, and lived to slay the dragon.

The problem was that Kai could not really move.

His head was full of dreadful whispers, and the remnant will of the abominable dragon was forcing him to do things he never wanted to do. Simply resisting that call was taking all of his strength… and that was with the dragon not paying him any attention, as well.

His thoughts were not his own.

'Betrayed you… poisoned you… made you into an abomination… lured you… abandoned you… traitor… traitor… TRAITOR!'

Kai groaned and grabbed his head, but the whispers only grew louder.

The worst part about them was that, because of his Flaw, Kai knew that it was all true. He — the other he — had indeed been betrayed, corrupted, used, and abandoned. By none other than Sunny, the person he trusted the most... the other Sunny, perhaps. At least that was what the dragon believed.

'Hurt him… kill him… punish him… take his hope away… take his will away… TAKE HIS CROWN AWAY!'

Kai gritted his teeth, refusing to listen.

He knew himself very well. That… wasn't him.

That wasn't them.

Luckily, Sunny was attacking the dragon so fiercely that it had no time to turn its gaze at Kai. And so, the insurmountable authority of its command was slowly growing weaker.

Groaning, Kai turned to the puddle of water and looked at the one who was hiding in the reflections. His lips moved:

"Be… ready."

With that, he slowly picked up his bow and raised it with trembling hands.

His bow was a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, and there were plenty of enchanted arrows in his soul arsenal. The problem was that, despite that, Kai had failed to deal substantial damage to the abominable dragon. Ironically, the most damage he had dealt was to the shadow giant Sunny created, just before the explosion.

However… with his supernatural sight, Kai had long noticed a special scale hidden on the dragon's chest. It was of a different color than all others, as if forged from iron, and had a peculiar shape.

Looking down, he looked at the iron amulet in the shape of an anvil hanging from a string on his neck. That amulet had been with him since the Second Nightmare, given to him by Sunny.

And so… his evil copy must have possessed it, as well.

Ignoring the pain, Kai gritted his teeth and rose, then strained his muscles, and drew his bow.

The string was heavy.

One shot…

Sunny seemed to be moments away from death, so there would be no time for another. He couldn't miss.

He wouldn't miss.

Silencing the deafening whispers that drowned his mind, Kai did what he was best at — aimed his bow, held his breath, and allowed his fingers to slip from the string.

A sinister red arrow flashed through the darkness…

And hit the small iron scale hidden among countless others on the chest of the lunging dragon.

The dragon's claws tore through the forming shadow giant and struck Sunny, pressing him into the ground.

The arrow failed to pierce the creature's tough hide, and so Kai swayed, suddenly weak from blood loss.

…But it did break that single scale, cracking it in two.

In the next moment, the man hiding in the reflection was suddenly gone, and the dragon froze in place.

Something sinister reflected in the depths of his silver eyes.

Chapter-1520: Dreadful Soul

'What a sight…'

Mordret watched as Nightingale, picturesque despite being bloodied and covered in dust, drew his bow and let an arrow loose.

He had fled to the floating fortress after noticing the Denial Amulet fused into the Dread Lord's scales — and just in time. Something truly curious had happened in Twilight, destroying all the reflections he could have used to take a look. It was probably Changing Star's fault… or Soul Stealer's fault. In any case, Mordret would have been burned to a crisp if he had not left the city.

After traversing the still water and reaching the fortress, he hid in the reflections and observed what was happening inside. Sunless was fighting like a madman… more of a madman than he usually was… while the Dread Lord viciously mauled and battered him.

Truly, it was a miracle that Sunless had been able to battle the tyrant of Verge for so long, and even deliver countless wounds to the mighty dragon. What other Master could have done the same? That guy really boggled the mind.

Nevertheless, there was something strange about their fight. The Defiled Saint could have gone for the kill a long time ago, but he was restraining himself. Probably because he wanted to capture Sunless alive.

And make him a slave again.

That made sense. Although Mordret mostly knew about the Six Plagues from the records he had spied in the frozen reflection of Twilight, the Mad Prince seemed to have been the deterrence the tyrant of Verge used to keep the other five Defiled champions in check… especially Soul Stealer.

Now that Soul Stealer had finally turned on him, Sunless and his sinister soul were the best weapon the Dread Lord could use against the rebellious fiend.

Mordret studied Nightingale for a while, amused.

'...Have I really submitted to that naive fool?'

Well, he must not have remained naive for long after becoming Defiled. Still... how had Soul Stealer missed the chance to become the master of the Mad Prince himself, after Changing Star was gone? The impostor... was really a disappointment.

Regardless, Mordret had spoken to the Nightingale — the original carrier of the Denial Amulet — just before Twilight went up in flames. The charming archer had a part to play…

And now, it seemed that he had played it brilliantly.

A red arrow whistled through the air and struck the small scale on the chest of the giant dragon, cracking it.

'What a shot.'

How hard would it be, to hit a target so small, and a moving one at that?

Mordret allowed himself to admire the precision of the Ascended archer for a split second.

And then dove into the Dread Lord's corrupted soul.

'Here we go…'

Smiling, Mordret found himself surrounded by darkness.

The darkness extended its revolting tendrils, trying to catch him. A forest of them rose from all sides, slithering like snakes. Trembling slightly, he evaded the grasp of Corruption and dashed forward.

'That's why I hate invading the souls of Nightmare Creatures…'

At least he possessed both of his hands here. Sadly, Mordret could only reflect the powers and weapons of the master of the invaded soul, not use his own. And since the Dread Lord had surrendered to Defilement and was thus banished from the Nightmare Spell, there were no Memories here for Mordret to summon.

The Memories were given by the Spell, and taken away by the Spell.

There were other things he could steal, though…

Almost caught by the harrowing tendrils, he jumped and soared into the air. Flying was not something Mordret did often, but he had experienced it before — so, learning how to use this particular Ability only took him a moment.

His body rippled and swelled, becoming covered by impregnable scales. Two mighty wings sprouted from his back, and his teeth turned into sharp porcelain fangs.

He became a dragon.

Mordret had not been a dragon before, but he had stolen bodies of Nightmare Creatures of a similar kind. So, he grew accustomed to this new shape quickly.

Finally, his eerie gaze pierced the vile darkness and found a figure standing in the heart of it, lonesome and lost.

The soul of the Dread Lord still maintained its human appearance… he must not have surrendered to Corruption entirely, yet.

A vicious smile twisted Mordret's reptilian lips.

'Time to die…'

He wasn't sure which one of them was going to die, but was eager to find out.

Mordret was merely an Ascended Monster right now, while the Dread Lord… there were five repugnant masses of Corruption hidden in the boundless darkness of his defiled soul, so he had to be a Corrupted Tyrant. The chances of victory were slim.

But then again, Mordret had killed numerous foes who were more powerful than him… more experienced than him, more knowledgeable about the nuances of their Aspects than him, more proficient in using their Memories than him.

However, none of them had been as resourceful as him, as resolute as him, or as ruthless as him.

Nightingale was a brave, but naive fool… so how much better could his Corrupted version be?

If there was one thing Mordret was afraid of, though, it was the knowledge of the Defilement the Dread Lord wielded.

That was why this battle was a gamble, even more so than every other soul battle Mordret had fought in the past.

'I'll just have to kill him before he has time to say anything, then…'

In the distance, the lonesome figure moved, finally noticing the invader.

A mad light ignited in the Dread Lord's eyes.

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Far away, among the scorched ruins of Twilight, nothing living moved. The buildings — those that were far enough from the epicenter of the blast to not be reduced to dust — had either collapsed or stood blackened and deformed. Ash fell from the dark sky like snow, covering the desolate landscape.

Most of the living beings that had witnessed the birth of the radiant star had been turned to ash, but piles of smoldering corpses still remained at the edges of the city. The walls surrounding Twilight had collapsed, and the giant carcasses beyond them were scorched.

A pale hand rose from the water among those carcasses.

Surfacing, Cassie climbed onto the carapace of a dead abomination and gulped for air. Then, she collapsed and lay motionlessly, ash falling on her face from the dark sky.

The iron locket was still with her, safe and sound.

A slender rapier hovered in the air above the blind girl, seemingly concerned. Cassie concentrated on it, feeling her consciousness begin to slip.

"Go…"

The Quiet Dancer hesitated for a few moments, then disappeared into the darkness.

Cassie sighed and allowed her battered body to relax.

Laying on the blackened carapace of a dead abomination, she turned her head to face the ruins of Twilight.

A cold, pale smile appeared on her lips.

***

In the heart of the destroyed city, Nephis slowly opened her eyes.

Soul Stealer was no more.

The bright radiance suffusing her skin slowly grew dim and disappeared. The white flames dancing in her eyes were extinguished. Her silver hair, which had been flowing in an ethereal wind, fell down.

Standing naked amidst the scene of utter devastation, she shivered and looked around.

Her mind was empty.

After a while, Nephis realized that her tunic had been destroyed, and summoned another Memory. The familiar weight of the Starlight Legion Armor — the only one she had left — settled on her shoulders, making her feel comforted.

That armor…

It felt as if she was forgetting something.

'Twilight… Soul Stealer… the Dread Lord…'

As she remained motionless, considering her thoughts, a slender rapier fell from the dark sky and hovered in front of her, trembling slightly. Nephis looked at it impassively.

The rapier turned, its tip pointing into the darkness.

"You want to lead me somewhere?"

Quiet Dancer… that was Cassie's Echo.

The rapier trembled again, and then flew forward.

Frowning slightly, Nephis followed.

Chapter-1521: Sharpest Arrow

In the courtyard of the drowning fortress, a harrowing dragon growled and took a step back, its massive body shuddering. His silver eyes had lost their sinister light, turning glossy and unfocused.

A vicious battle must have been taking place in the dragon's corrupted soul.

The maddening whispers thundering in Kai's head finally grew silent. He swayed, then took a labored breath and limped toward Sunny.

His friend was laying on the cold stones, barely alive. His body was a terrible painting of torn flesh, white bones visible through its mangled mess. Eerily, he was still not bleeding at all… usually, Kai would have been reassured by that fact, but right now, it looked like Sunny was already a cold corpse.

But he wasn't a corpse. Sunny was still moving, struggling to stand up. Even after battling a Defiled Saint tooth and nail, he was still unbroken, trying to continue to fight.

As Kai approached, he heard his furious whispers:

"Kill you… I'll kill you… shut up! I'll tear you apart!"

Strangely enough, his hateful gaze was not directed at the archer. Instead, Sunny was glaring past him, seemingly at an empty spot.

Kai felt his heart tighten.

'What is happening to him?'

Sunny had always had a wild personality, and there was that time he had turned a little feral in the Dark City… but he was never truly mad. Now, however, it seemed as though his friend had entirely lost

his mind.

'There must be a reason.'

He had warned Kai to stay away before, had he not? That meant that this strange condition Sunny was in had a purpose. To resist the authority of the Dread Lord, most likely… somehow. It had to be a part of some cunning scheme.

He would deal with it later.

For now, Kai had a more serious problem to solve.

The abominable dragon was still alive. And while that man, Mordret, seemed confident in himself, there was no telling who would prevail in their dire fight.

The result would be clear in seconds.

But…

Kai looked at the dragon with a lost expression.

The Dread Lord, Mordret… both of them were monsters. He still remembered what the scion of the Great Clan Valor had done in the Second Nightmare. The harrowing massacre he had perpetrated in the Kingdom of Hope was not something a sane person would ever commit.

Even if he did win, was it really fine to let the dreadful authority of Kai's voice fall into the hands of someone so depraved?

"...Wait a little more, Sunny. I'll come back for you, soon."

Turning away from his friend, Kai gritted his teeth and pushed himself off the ground. Soaring into the air, he strained his core muscles to draw the string of his bow, and at the same time, summoned the sharpest arrow he had in store.

That one was not capable of producing devastating blasts, or robbing Nightmare Creatures of their strength. Its enchantment was rather simple — it burrowed much deeper than other arrows would,

piercing flesh and bone like butter.

The drawback was that the arrow was flimsy and fragile. It was disobedient and slow, too, so hitting anything with it was a tough task. More than that, its tip would shatter against any kind of armor… therefore, it wasn't easy to make use of the insidious enchantment.

But now that the abominable dragon was nearly paralyzed by the battle happening within its soul, Kai had a chance. Of course, the battle could end at any moment…

It could even end right now, leaving him defenseless in front of the terrifying dragon.

Nevertheless, he brought himself right to the dragon's maw, and looked into the dragon's silver eyes.

Then, Kai activated his Ascended Ability and uttered a command…

He wasn't addressing the Dread Lord, however. He was addressing himself.

"KILL HIM!"

Suddenly, a fierce strength filled his broken body, and a cold, frightening will flooded his mind.

Raising his bow, Kai aimed carefully… and sent an arrow flying straight through the Dread Lord's radiant eye.

The distance was too short for it to stray off course, and there was no armor in the way to make the tip break.

The insidious arrow slid into the dragon's eye, pierced through it, and burrowed deep into the creature's brain. It had been shot from a Transcendent bow of the Fifth Tier by the hand of a Master, and so the havoc it wreaked inside the Dread Lord's head was truly gruesome.

His body had been battered in the battle against Sunny, and his soul had been weakened by the battle against Mordret of Valor.

The dragon shuddered and let out a terrible groan.

...Blasted by that groan, Kai was thrown back and crashed into the pile of stone rubble far below.

Above him, the Dread Lord convulsed, a fountain of silver blood shooting from his open maw. His head drew an arc in the air…

And then, the mighty dragon toppled and fell heavily to the ground, his silver eyes growing dim.

This time, forever.

Barely conscious, Kai heard the Spell whisper into his ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Tyrant, Hideous Ruler of the Empty Sky.]

[You have…]

Consumed by pain, he didn't hear the rest.

He did, however, hear a terrible scream.

Turning his head, Kai saw a human figure rolling on the ground in agony. It was Mordret, the scion of Valor… missing a hand and covered in blood. There was something terribly wrong with that lunatic, though. His face, which had seemed to be incapable of showing earnest emotions, was now twisted by a terrible grimace, an eerie darkness devouring his eyes.

Letting out a stifled groan, Mordret clutched at the stones and crawled to the nearby puddle. Reaching it, he thrust his hand into the water… no, into his own reflection… and tore something from within his chest, then threw it away.

The thing looked like a soul shard… no, a piece of a mirror.

Hitting the ground, the mirror shard suddenly rippled and turned into a vague figure. That figure then turned into a perfect copy of Mordret.

A Reflection, created by ripping one of his cores out of his soul.

There was something terribly wrong with that Reflection, though.

As Kai watched, stunned, the visage of Mordret was twisted and deformed, tendrils of vile darkness sprouting from within it. The ghastly creature suddenly looked incredibly threatening and sinister, a frenzied smile blooming on its bloodied lips.

It was as though he was watching a seed of Corruption bloom, turning the human into a Nightmare Creature right in front of his eyes.

Still on the ground, Mordret whispered a quiet curse.

"Ah… that… was truly unpleasant."

He did not look capable of fighting the Defiled Reflection, though, in that wretched state.

Kai was laying in the rubble, his body broken and mangled, so he was not much better. Sunny was still wreathing on the ground, trying to stand up, but he was the most corpse-like of them three.

'I must protect him…'

Kai tried to move, but a surge of pain sent him crashing back down on the sharp stones. A short yelp escaped from his lips.

With unwanted tears in his eyes, he looked up and saw the vile Reflection walking toward his friend. Its missing hand had sprouted terrible glass claws, and its jaw was unhinged, twisted fangs growing through the mangled flesh.

'No!'

Before the creature could reach Sunny, though…

A slender rapier pierced its chest, and a radiant hand grasped its head.

In the next moment, the Reflection was illuminated from inside by a

pure white light. Smoke rose from its open mouth and charred holes where its eyes had been just a moment ago, filling the air with the revolting stench of burned flesh.

Then, a net of cracks covered the creature's body, and it shattered like a glass sculpture.

Behind it, the figure of Changing Star was revealed, looking down with an emotionless expression.

Sparks of pure white flame danced in her cold grey eyes, and she somehow seemed both the same and different from the last time Kai had seen her, back in the Nightmare Desert.

Turning her head slightly, Nephis looked at the corpse of the harrowing dragon and remained motionless for a few moments.

Then, she said, her voice strangely devoid of feeling:

"We won."

Chapter-1522: Break of Dawn

Driven to madness by wrath, Sunny was forcing his mangled body to move. His mind was muddled by fury and pain, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stand up, for some reason.

An inferno of dark, malignant rage was consuming his aching heart.

'No, no, no!'

The dragon… the hateful worm… was laying dead on the wet stones, stolen from him. Silver blood was pouring from his opened maw and obliterated eye, slowly spreading across the ruined courtyard. If only there had been more time... if only no one had interfered in their fight... Sunny would have been able to slay the Dread Lord himself. He knew he would.

But the dragon was gone.

And now that he was gone, Sunny's suffocating fury needed a new target.

'Kill, kill them… kill them all… I'll kill them…'

He could sense several shapes through the shadows. The loathsome fly that had stolen his prey, the crippled fiend who had come from the water, and a macabre abomination that had been spawned by a tainted shard of the fiend's soul.

And the most odious of them all… a pale young man wearing a nebulous black mantle, who was looking at him mockingly with a derisive smile.

"Look at you, fool. Mad as a hatter. How pathetic… how familiar… how distasteful..."

Sunny growled.

The abomination was staggering toward him, piercing him with the demented gaze of its rotten eyes. Glass claws were growing from its stump, and twisted fangs were growing from its bloodied maw.

He grinned.

'Good, good…'

He couldn't stand up, for the moment, so the creature was graciously delivering itself to him. Sunny was going to enjoy tearing it apart.

But before he could, a slender rapier pierced the abomination's chest, and a radiant hand grasped its head. The creature glowed with incandescent light, being incinerated from within, and then shattered like a broken mirror.

He howled, his hoarse voice full of indescribable rage.

'No, no!'

Another… they stole another from him! Thieves, traitors!

He had to kill them, rip them, savage them, break them!

As Sunny growled and tried to push his mangled body up, someone approached and halted a mere step away. He looked up and saw a breathtaking young woman looking at him silently from above, her beautiful face devoid of emotion. Her silver hair was moving slightly in the wind, and radiant sparks were dancing in her cold grey eyes.

"I'll… destroy you…"

Sunny tried to summon the shadows to rip the young woman's body apart, but his muddled mind failed to contain the intricate patterns of the manifested forms. The vicious shadow hands crumbled and dissolved before taking shape.

The young woman studied him for a few moments, then kneeled and put a hand on his head, caressing his hair.

Her touch made Sunny shudder.

'I have to… kill her…'

The visage of the smoke streaming from the abomination's burned eyes flashed in his mind and disappeared, drowning in the sea of madness.

But, somehow… even though Sunny wanted nothing more than to see the young woman die, he hesitated for a moment.

It was then that she spoke, her voice sounding both strange and familiar.

"Sunny…"

He gathered his strength, preparing to lunge at her.

"Dismiss your crown."

He had not thought that a more profound rage existed, but when he heard those words, his entire being ignited with a harrowing fury. The thought of surrendering his crown filled Sunny with a boundless ocean of frenzied wrath, deep and dark enough to be unfathomable.

That wrath was far more scorching than the rage he had felt toward the odious dragon, and vaster than even the hatred he felt toward the thieves who had stolen his prey.

However…

The authority contained in the voice of the young woman was absolute.

It was nothing like the cold commands of the dragon, which had been oppressive and domineering to the point of being irresistible… but only nearly so.

There was a boundless abyss between nearly and absolutely.

Drowning in fury and at the same time filled with horror, Sunny felt his very soul respond to the young woman's order, following it

obediently, as if he had no will of his own. He felt broken and violated, which only made his bloodlust and desire to kill explode more.

Despite that, though, he still could not even attempt to disobey.

'She… she ordered me.'

The Crown of Twilight dissolved into a whirlwind of sparks.

And with it, Sunny's frenzied wrath disappeared as well.

Leaving behind only horror.

Confusion, too… and pain.

Finally, the pain he had been ignoring caught up with Sunny, making him shudder and let out a tormented groan.

He was consumed by agony.

But then, the hand resting on his head ignited with a soft glow, and its comforting warmth chased the pain away. A wave of cleansing white flame spread through his body, mending his broken flesh and healing his harrowing wounds.

The sense of relief it brought was overwhelming.

Which only added to Sunny's confusion.

Soon, he was left laying on the ground, disoriented and feeling lost. Everything that had happened since he activated the [King's Resentment] enchantment of the Crown of Twilight was like a blur, but the memory of it remained, etched into his mind.

'...What happened?'

Sunny felt incredibly tired, but he forced himself to raise his head.

Nephis was kneeling in front of him… wearing the Starlight Legion Armor, for some reason. Her striking grey eyes were calm and cold.

Behind her, the corpse of the Dread Lord towered above the ruined

courtyard of the floating fortress. Kai was laying on a pile of rubble, heavily wounded. Mordret was there, as well, staring at the dead dragon with a grim expression.

The world was dark, with only a few rays of pale sunshine pouring through the veil of ashen clouds.

There was something else, as well… a black crow was perched on the remnants of the broken wall, staring down at them.

Sunny looked at Nephis, a storm of emotions raging in his heart.

Noticing that he had regained his senses, she nodded simply and rose.

Turning away, she walked toward where Kai was laying, his ivory armor painted by blood. Soon, soft radiance flowed from her hands, healing the archer.

At the same time, Mordret sighed deeply and looked at Kai with a hint of resentment.

"Why did you do it? I almost had him."

Kai met his gaze somberly, and then said in a hoarse voice:

"That was why I did it."

The Prince of Nothing remained silent for a moment, then grinned with dark amusement and turned to Nephis. Waving his bloody stump in the air, he asked blithely:

"Don't I get healed?"

Her answer was cold and even:

"...Wait for your turn."

Sunny observed it all, too tired to move, and too numb to think.

Soon, two figures climbed over the pile of rubble that the wall of the fortress had turned to. They were Effie and Jet.

Effie was walking while supporting her weight with a spear, while Jet

was carrying unconscious Cassie. When she appeared, both Crow Crow and the Quiet Dancer rushed to her side.

The wind tore apart the veil of clouds, and finally, the light of dawn illuminated the drowning fortress once again.

Sunny looked at the sky pensively.

A strange thought surfaced in his mind.

'We… won.'

Chapter-1523: Endlessly Flowing

Soon enough, the wind carried the clouds of ash away. Twilight was once again illuminated by the beautiful light of dawn… what was left of Twilight, at least.

The floating fortress where the Dread Lord had died broke apart and drowned in the still water.

The water itself was starting to move, sparkling in the sunlight. Now that the Serpent King's city and whatever enchantments had held it in place were destroyed, the current was slowly returning.

Soon enough, the current would carry it all — the blackened ruins of Twilight, the corpses of the Defiled that had stormed it, and the broken ships of its fallen defenders — to the Edge, then throw them into the lightless abyss that lay beyond it. Where they would never be found or seen again, unless someone braved the void and reached the very bottom of Ariel's dreadful world.

Erasing all signs that Twilight had ever existed from the endlessly flowing surface of the Great River.

…Until the next cycle came.

Hopefully, Sunny would not be there to witness it.

The cohort had returned aboard the Chain Breaker before the fortress drowned. Now, they were observing the charred carcass of the inconceivable abomination that had served as the foundation of Twilight slowly crumbling and submerging underwater. The brilliant explosion had put a net of cracks into it, and now, the weight of the immense carapace and the water pressure were slowly pulling it apart.

Well… some of them were observing.

Some were in no condition to pay it much attention, if any at all.

Cassie was still unconscious. Her wounds, including the deep gash on her neck, had been healed by Nephis, but the blind girl was showing no signs of waking up, yet. Surviving the mayhem and the obliterating blast must have taken a toll on her.

Nephis herself was sitting at the stern of the flying vessel, staring into the distance with a detached look on her face. She was utterly exhausted, but also… this was her usual state after overusing her Aspect. It was as if her humanity had been burned away, and needed time to restore itself.

Somehow, Sunny felt that this time, that process would take longer than it had in the past.

Which was… understandable. He already realized that the devastating explosion that destroyed the city, and turned every living being on its streets to ash, had been somehow caused by Nephis.

Sunny did not know the details, but could see that she was a Titan now. That had to be the result of her fires consuming all the Nightmare Creatures that had been fighting against Soul Stealer, and then killing the mirror fiend himself. Neph's [Halfbreed] Innate Ability granted her a portion of the soul fragments of all beings killed by her flames, after all.

He himself was in no mood to observe the collapse of Twilight, either. Slumped against the trunk of the sacred tree, Sunny was not much different from Nephis. Using the [King's Resentment] had taken a toll on him, making him feel utterly drained and exhausted. His gaze was distant, and his face was pale from fatigue.

There was also a confusing storm of emotions raging in his heart, but at the same time, he was too numb to deal with that mess.

For now, he was simply happy to be alive… happy that all of them were alive.

While their enemies — against all odds — were dead.

Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare were guarding the ship… and keeping an eye on Mordret, in case the bastard decided to do something malicious. However, the Prince of Nothing did not seem inclined to turn on his allies, at least not just yet. He walked around the Chain Breaker, looking curiously at this and that.

That would have infuriated Sunny if he wasn't feeling so drained. What was that guy so curious about? He had already seen everything there was to see here, hiding in their eyes on the way to the Second Nightmare.

Perhaps looking at things through someone else's eyes and doing it yourself was not quite the same. Right… perhaps this Chain Breaker was not the same as the real Chain Breaker they had left in the real world, either.

In any case, Mordret was not a problem, for now.

Which left only Effie, Jet, and Kai.

The first two had been spared from participating in the battle for Twilight. Cassie had apparently saved them from being taken by Soul Stealer with the help of the Black Beast Locket, and then carried the locket out of the city before the obliterating blast.

Kai, meanwhile, was full of questions, but too polite to ask them all at once. The poor guy must have been utterly confused… out of all of them, the start of his Nightmare was perhaps the most dreadful.

As a result, the three were standing at the railings, looking at the blackened corpse of Twilight and talking quietly between themselves. Kai's expression constantly changed between stunned, expressionless, and mortified.

'Look at him, emoting so much… wait. He was the one who killed the Dread Lord, wasn't he? Damn. If I had a credit for every time Kai killed a dragon… I would have two credits now… strange...'

Sunny studied the face of his friend for a few minutes, considering if he had to apologize for trying to kill him. Kai had blown up his shadow shell, too, so… they were probably even?

In any case, this dilemma seemed too tiring and complicated to consider right now. Looking away, Sunny turned his full attention to the wood grain of the Chain Breaker's deck.

Everything had gone wrong in Twilight. He had failed… but also prevailed, in a sense. Soul Stealer was dead. The Dread Lord was dead, too.

The army they had hoped to recruit was dead as well.

And Nephis had used the Shadow Bond.

To cure Sunny from madness, but still. She had broken her promise.

Again.

And saved him, again.

'What a mess.'

Tired and confused, he closed his eyes and lowered his head to the root of the sacred tree.

He just wanted to sleep.

The problems, messy as they were, could wait until tomorrow.

Chapter-1524: Bitter, Sweet

By the time Sunny woke up, it was night.

Even this place of endless dawn had a night, just like the crimson expanse of eternal dusk had one. However, nights were short and fleeting at the edges of the Great River.

Before he knew it, the sevens suns were already rising again.

The world became painted by the soft colors of the breaking dawn.

With a sigh, Sunny rubbed his eyes and sat up.

He felt… strangely great. His body was in perfect shape because of Neph's healing flames, and his mental energy had been restored with the help of the Shroud of Dusk after having a good sleep.

Nightmare had also guarded his dreams, as well as the dreams of everyone else aboard the Chain Breaker. Here in the pyramid built by the Demon of Dread, that alone was more important than one would think.

'Great…'

Nevertheless, his good mood was diminished when he remembered what had transpired in Twilight.

'I... should probably be happy, right?'

Beyond himself, even.

And he was, to an extent. Two of the most dangerous enemies there were in the Tomb of Ariel had been slain, so why wouldn't he? Finally, the end of this Nightmare did not seem so distant as to be impossible anymore. Salvation was within reach, already visible far in the distance — just like the first rays of the rising suns were,

shining from beyond the horizon to break the reign of night.

But Sunny couldn't feel completely happy. That victory of theirs had been too perilous, almost turning into defeat. In fact, it should have been a defeat, if not for a couple miracles.

Other than that… he was not happy with himself, personally.

Sunny had accomplished a few astonishing feats during the battle for Twilight, true — reaching the throne room of the Serpent King's palace, lifting the curse of frozen time, resisting the authority of the Dread Lord, fighting the Defiled Saint almost to a standstill while being inhabited by madness, and even realizing the full potential of his current level of mastery over Shadow Dance.

What other Master could boast that they were not only capable of transforming themselves akin to a Saint, but were also not limited to a single static form? Turning into monstrous serpents, winged horrors, and dreadful beasts… truly, the depth of his Divine Aspect was slowly starting to put the entire hierarchy of Awakened under question.

Most of the things Sunny had done yesterday, nobody else could have accomplished. And without him there, the cohort would have undoubtedly perished.

And yet…

In the end, he had been defeated. He had been defeated by the Dread Lord, and he had been defeated by the [King's Resentment] enchantment of the Crown of Twilight. Most of all, he had been defeated by his own lack of foresight and knowledge. He was only alive by chance.

Knowing that did not feel great at all.

Sunny sighed.

'Well, one can't win every time.'

He knew that such thoughts were immature and childish. He had long realized, after all, that his allies were a part of his power. So,

their triumph was his triumph, just like his triumph would be theirs in turn. Still... Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed in himself. He had done remarkably well in this Nightmare up until yesterday.

Experiencing a serious setback was a change of pace.

And then there was the fact that Nephis had to resort to using Shadow Bond in order to make him come back to his senses.

He… did not know how to feel about it.

Logically, there was no reason to be hurt or angry. It had been done for his own good, after all, and brought him no harm. It might very well have saved the lives of his friends, too. In fact, if Sunny had been able to think at that moment, he would have asked Nephis to use her power over him to help him escape from the insidious effect of the [King's Resentment] himself.

That would have been a cunning way to cheat the system.

But humans were not logical creatures.

All Sunny knew was that he could not forget that moment. The horror of having his will violated in such a tyrannical fashion. The hopelessness he felt when his body and soul moved despite his wishes, refusing to obey him. Obeying someone else instead. The demented fury he had felt at that time only made the experience so much more disturbing and vivid.

That memory was like a shadow that hung over his head.

Grimacing, Sunny shook his head and looked around.

A moment later, his expression soured. He noticed a pair of hateful eyes glaring at him from a few meters away… the Sin of Solace was back, looking at him mockingly.

"Finally awake, are you? So, how does it feel to be…"

"Shut up."

Sunny did not let the sword wraith finish and stood up, deciding to go find the other members of the cohort.

Nephis was still in the strange state of having had her… reserve of humanity burned away by the terrible torment of her Flaw. Usually, she would have already been up and about, preparing breakfast for the cohort, but today, that did not happen. Instead, Nephis was simply meditating at the stern of the Chain Breaker, unmoved and unbothered by anything.

The other members of the cohort had chosen not to disturb her. There was a tantalizing smell spreading through the air — Effie had taken it upon herself to cook up a feast, using the supplies stored in the cargo hold of the flying ship without sparing any of the ingredients.

Sunny heard his stomach growl, and realized how hungry he was.

Soon, all of them — even Nephis — had gathered on the mess deck, sitting around a table.

Cassie had regained consciousness, but was still pale. Kai seemed to be a bit out of it, undoubtedly digesting the many incredible twists and turns of this bizarre Nightmare. Effie and Jet were, more or less, their usual selves.

It almost looked like the good old days when the cohort shared meals together, with the added bonus of having Jet keep them company.

There was only one thing spoiling the atmosphere.

Mordret was also there, sitting near Sunny and looking at them with a curious expression.

The Prince of Nothing picked up a pair of chopsticks and smiled pleasantly.

"What's for breakfast?"

Chapter-1525: Memory of Light

The breakfast ended up passing in a strange atmosphere.

Which was understandable, considering that they were sharing the table with a homicidal maniac. Mordret was nothing but amiable and pleasant, but it was exactly his disarming charm that made everyone feel disturbed and uncomfortable. After all, they all knew what the Prince of Nothing was capable of… some better than others.

Mordret was not the only one who made the conversation feel stifled, though. Nephis was still detached and impassive. Cassie was keeping quiet, as if she had forgotten how to speak. Sunny was not in the mood to talk, either, concentrating on his food. Kai was deep in thought, still struggling to come to terms with what he had learned from Effie and Jet.

After a while, all seven of them were more or less done with the meal. In the silence that followed, Effie glanced around the table.

"So…"

She leaned back and smiled.

"...Is anyone going to explain what the hell happened in that damned city?"

Sunny looked at her somberly. So did Nephis and Mordret — the former without any emotion, the latter with a hint of amusement. At that moment, Jet stretched her legs, crossed them comfortably, and nodded.

"Yeah. Actually, I'm dying to know, too."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, trying to imagine the situation from their perspective, then sighed.

Taking a sip of tea, he said:

"Well… first of all, our base assumption was wrong. We assumed that Twilight had been frozen in the middle of a battle between its army and the invading forces of the Defilement, but in fact, it was a battle between Soul Stealer and the Dread Lord all along."

He paused, then added in a dark tone:

"They must have breached the walls of the city, which allowed Soul Stealer to consume the souls of everyone in Twilight. That was when he turned on the Dread Lord and tried to consume him, as well… and when the Mad Prince made use of the situation to activate the defensive array and trap them both. So, when I deactivated the array, both of those fiends were unleashed."

Across the table from him, Cassie suddenly spoke:

"Some of us have a good chance of resisting Prince Mordret's power, but some don't. That was why you two had to be hidden from Soul Stealer."

She turned slightly, facing Mordret.

He smiled innocently.

'I don't like it at all...'

Sunny stared at the Prince of Nothing silently for a moment, then looked away.

"Don't worry. You don't have to be wary of him… too much. We are currently allies, after all, and he knows that if something untoward happens, this Nightmare will become his grave."

The threat hidden in his words was not very subtle. But Sunny did not really worry about Mordret — there might have been something really wrong with that guy, but he was not a fool. The exact opposite, actually. He knew that harming any member of the cohort inside the Tomb of Ariel would be a fatal mistake.

Especially now, right after Soul Stealer had been destroyed by

Nephis, Mordret would not risk making them all his enemies. At least not until the very last moments of the Nightmare.

Sunny sighed.

"In any case, pretty much as soon as the array was deactivated, Kai and I faced the Dread Lord. I had to use an enchantment of the Crown of Twilight to resist his commands, but at the cost of plunging into an uncontrollable rage. While the two of us fought against the dragon, Nephis and Cassie found themselves surrounded by the vessels of Soul Stealer."

He paused.

"I am… actually not too sure what happened next."

Saying that, Sunny hesitated.

He said that he did not know, but in truth, he did know something.

Shimmering runes were glowing in the air in front of him. They read:

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Titan.

Soul Cores: [7/7].

Soul Fragments: [7000/7000].

Which was already startling enough. But there was something else near the end of the field of runes. Several new strings had appeared there.

Those were the runes that truly gave him pause.

Shifting his gaze slightly, Sunny read them once again:

Aspect Legacy: [Memory of Light].

Aspect Legacy Description: [A beautiful tree grew from the ashes of doubt, bearing fruits of knowledge.]

Knowledge of Fire: [Mastered].

Knowledge of ???: Unearned.

Knowledge of ???: Unearned.

Knowledge of ???: Unearned.

Knowledge of ???: Unearned.

Knowledge of ???: Unearned.

Knowledge of ???: Unearned.

There were seven strings in total, with only one of them revealed and described as mastered.

So… whatever happened to Nephis in Twilight had not only allowed her to become a Titan, but also unlocked her Aspect Legacy. And that Aspect Legacy was more than a little bit strange, seemingly granting some sort of knowledge instead of Relics.

Sunny would lie if he said that he wasn't interested in learning what had happened.

He looked at Nephis, hoping that she would explain at least something.

She remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged indifferently.

"I tried to make my way to the palace, but Soul Stealer stood in my way. Facing defeat, I made a breakthrough and conceived of a new way of using my Aspect… just like you had conceived of using yours to take shapes of powerful creatures. So, I used one of my soul cores as fuel and destroyed it to unleash a conflagration of soul flame."

Sunny stared at her incredulously. On paper, what Nephis said made sense… he had indeed managed to deepen his understanding of his Aspect and create techniques like Shadow Shell and Shadow

Incarnation, thus becoming more powerful while remaining of the same Rank. In a similar fashion, Nephis could have deepened her understanding and reached new heights of power.

But there was a piece of the puzzle missing.

"So… your Aspect allows you to burn your own soul and use it as fuel. But why was the explosion so immense and destructive?"

She looked at him impassively.

"My soul essence is especially potent, as you know. The explosion would have been devastating, regardless. But… yes, there was another element, as well. It was sorcery."

Sunny raised his eyebrow, hiding how perplexed he was.

"...Sorcery?"

Nephis nodded.

"Yes. The sorcery of Names. I used the Name of Wind to fan the flames burning across Twilight, and absorbed them. Then, I ignited my soul... and whispered the Name of Fire. You saw the rest.

In the end, all vessels of Soul Stealer were destroyed. The remnants of the Defiled horde were destroyed, as well, allowing me to reform the Terror Core and form a new one."

She paused for a moment.

"With nowhere else to run, Soul Stealer was forced to enter my soul. I burned him."

Her even tone and motionless face made it seem as though destroying a Corrupted Titan, millions of his puppets, and thousands of Nightmare Creatures in one fell swoop was nothing out of the ordinary.

The rest of them stared at Nephis in stunned silence.

In the end, Effie grinned.

"Good job, Princess. Let's be friends, okay?"

Sunny was thinking about something else.

'Knowledge of Fire…'

He had an inkling of what the knowledge Nephis had received from her Aspect Legacy was. It had to have contained the True Name of Fire, at the minimum… of every kind of fire there was, perhaps. It must have also elevated her already unmatched affinity to flame to entirely new heights.

Nephis, meanwhile, looked at Effie with a hint of confusion in her striking grey eyes.

"...Aren't we already friends?"

The huntress chuckled and raised her thumb up.

Chapter-1526: Tempered in Flame

Nephis tilted her head, remained silent for a few moments, then said:

"I received a fair number of Memories, too… sadly, not nearly as many as one would have expected, considering the death toll of the explosion. Still, there is at least one or two for each of us. We can distribute them later."

With that, she turned to Sunny.

"That is what happened to Soul Stealer. What happened to the Dread Lord, though? How were the three of you able to kill him?"

He lingered for a bit.

'Cassie almost died in that explosion. Is Neph not concerned about that at all?'

A slight frown appeared on his face.

Eventually, he grimaced and answered in a dark tone:

"Well… I already said that the Crown of Twilight allowed me to ignore his commands. That should have made things easier, since his most fearsome weapon was taken away. In practice, though, so was mine. My mind. Without being able to think straight, I was no better than a frenzied beast… worse, even, because even a beast would have used everything at his disposal to survive."

He shook his head.

"But I was unwilling to summon my Shadows, or work together with Kai to bring the Dread Lord down. That was… unfortunate, to say the

least. In the end, we ended up outside the city, in that floating fortress. I tied down the fiend, relentlessly attacking his body.

That gave Kai an opportunity to destroy the amulet which had protected the bastard from Soul Stealer, and that gave Mordret an opportunity to attack his soul, in turn."

Sunny glanced at Kai and smiled from the corner of his mouth.

"The Dread Lord was paralyzed for a few seconds, and our resident dragon slayer used those seconds to drive an enchanted arrow through his brain. That was how the three of us — but mostly Kai — managed to kill him."

Kai had also prevented Mordret from taking possession of the Dread Lord's body, which would have undoubtedly given the Prince of Nothing ideas. Right now, he could be trusted not to turn on them because he needed Nephis to destroy the First Seeker. If Mordret had the power to subjugate her with the authority of the dragon's voice, though?

Who knew what he would have done?

In hindsight, Kai's decision to not wait for the results of the soul battle might have saved them all.

Sunny gave Mordret a somber look.

'Gods. How did I end up on the same team as that guy?'

Noticing his gaze, the Prince of Nothing smiled.

"Oh… I would have killed the Dread Lord myself. Probably. There was a little problem, you see — a seed of Corruption somehow ended up blooming in my soul. Luckily, I managed to extricate the infected part and turn it into a Reflection before the disease spread. So, I am back to being a mere Beast. Alas."

Now, it was time for them to stare at Mordret.

'What the hell…'

Who talked about becoming infected with Corruption, cutting up their own soul, and turning the contaminated portion of it into an external entity in order to heal themselves? What insanity was that?

Then again… perhaps Sunny wasn't the best person to accuse someone of insanity. He was currently living out the devious plan concocted by his past Defiled self, after all.

While he was contemplating whether any of the seven people present on the mess deck could be called sane, Jet smiled and winked at Kai.

"Congratulations, Ascended Nightingale. Welcome to the club… the I Killed Myself club? No, that doesn't sound right. Let's call it the Othercide Club. You know, for people who killed the other, evil version of themselves."

She yawned lazily and summoned a wisp of mist, making it swirl around her fingers.

"So, did you unlock your Aspect Legacy, as well? Or at least received a powerful Memory? Oh… you could have received an Echo, even. Having an Echo of yourself would be really weird, right?"

Everyone looked at Kai, imagining him having an Echo of himself.

He coughed awkwardly.

"That… no, I did not unlock my Aspect Legacy. Or receive a Memory, or an Echo. Actually, something strange happened."

He hesitated for a moment.

"I seem to have received an Attribute, instead. The [Dragonslayer] Attribute. I am… not quite sure what it does."

Sunny tilted his head, slightly bewildered.

'So… it's an actual Attribute.'

"What does the description say?"

Kai seemed to blush a little.

"Ah… you know… something about being forged in battle, tempered in flame, and quenched in dragon blood… stuff like that."

Sunny stared at him incredulously.

'Well, damn. I bet the Spell was generous on the compliments, too.'

In any case, Kai's new Attribute had to have made his friend stronger. Considering the description, it most likely had something to do with durability and elemental resistance. Maybe there was a deeper layer to it, too — the truth would come out in time.

Good… that was good. The cohort was finally assembled, and most of the members had already grown stronger. Nephis had received a collection of powerful Memories, as well — considering the strength of the Nightmare Creatures of the Defiled legion, many of them would be of the Transcendent Rank.

Sunny still had five Supreme soul shards stored in the Covetous Coffer, so he would be able to elevate some of those Memories to the Supreme Rank, as well.

The cohort would be ready to face Verge… and Torment. The only Plague that remained.

Was that by accident, or the result of someone's intent?

The will of the Mad Prince? Or Torment's own?

Sunny did not know, but suspected that one of those two, or maybe even both of them, had harbored plans for Verge behind the Dread Lord's back.

He sighed, then looked at Cassie and asked, not addressing anyone in particular:

"So… what's the plan now?"

Nephis answered immediately, no hesitation in her steady voice:

"What else? We sail for Verge, of course."

Then, she turned to Cassie and asked:

"What is the fastest way we can get there?"

The blind girl hesitated for a moment.

"I'll have to check."

She stood up and left, soon returning with a heavy crate. The stone slates they had recovered in the drowned temple of the Defiled sybil were stored there.

It took Cassie some time to lay the slates out on the table, reference them, and come up with an approximate route. In the end, she pointed to a particular slate. There, the shape of a graceful castle was etched.

"It seems that the fastest way to Verge is to simply sail downstream and keep going until we almost reach the dawn of time. However…"

The blind girl put two slates that did not seem to have anything in common together.

"With what we know about the shape of the Great River now, we can save a lot of time by simply crossing it, sailing past the western Edge, and braving the inner void. That way, we should be able to bypass most of the journey into the past and land near Verge directly."

A strange silence settled on the mess deck.

Nephis studied the stone slates for a while, then nodded.

"This will take us close to Fallen Grace first. Let's stop there on the way, then, before departing for the final battle."

She looked at them, her gaze lingering on Sunny for a few extra moments. Eventually, she said:

"...If there are no objections."

He might have been mistaken, but it seemed as though at least a hint of liveliness had returned to her voice. Well, the words liveliness and

Nephis did not really go together, but it was a great relief to see that her humanity was slowly coming back.

She was even interested in their opinions… his opinion, in particular. At least it seemed that way.

Sunny sighed.

'What else is there to do? If we want to escape this Nightmare, Verge is the only way.'

He shrugged.

"No objections from me."

The others did not have any, either.

After a few moments of silence, Nephis nodded.

"Onward to Verge, then."

Chapter-1527: Leaving Twilight

The Chain Breaker left the drowning remains of Twilight behind and turned away from the rising suns. Drifting above the currents, it traversed the dreadful battlefield and escaped into clear waters.

The Great River flowed below them. By now, the sight of the world in constant motion was both familiar and calming. Sunny had a feeling that returning to reality, where the ground was solid and unmoving, would be a strange experience.

There were no Nightmare Creatures in the vicinity of Twilight, so they could relax for a few days. The members of the cohort rested and recuperated, not doing anything in particular. They slept, consumed delicious meals, and spent their time in idleness.

Even Mordret's presence did not dampen the peaceful mood. He was nothing if not accommodating, even pleasant to be around. Of course, he was… true monsters knew better than anyone how to appear sympathetic and friendly, after all. And the Prince of Nothing was a singular existence even among the insidious monsters.

But that was fine. Sunny did not mind sharing a ship with him, as long as Mordret was an ally. Gods knew that the cohort needed all the help it could get in this dreadful, utterly unreasonable Nightmare.

Sunny himself did not do much in the first few days of their journey across the Great River. He slept some more, spent some time staring at the sky, and chatted with Kai, describing the past events of the Nightmare in more detail.

The month he had spent with Nephis on the carcass of the Black Turtle, the battle with the Azure Serpent. Their meeting with Ananke and the visit to forlorn Weave. The journey to Fallen Grace and their reunion with Cassie. The battle against the Defiled sybil… the dreadful months they had spent on Aletheia's Island, and their

eventual escape.

In the process, Sunny also spoke about the many mysteries they had solved and the startling revelations they had received in the Tomb of Ariel. Looking back… he had truly learned a lot here, both about the past and the present.

And about himself.

Kai was the perfect audience for his outrageous tales. Sharing his experiences with a friend soothed Sunny's conflicted heart, a little. He was not quite alright — after suffering so much in Antarctica and on the Great River, how could he be? But he was at least back to being his usual spirited self.

Almost.

There was still the issue of what had happened at the end of Twilight to deal with. If there was a way to deal with that, even. Sunny felt that he at least owed it to himself to have a talk with Nephis, pointless or not.

But with Nephis being in that strange dispassionate state, talking with her about deeply emotional issues did not seem like a good idea. She was slowly recovering, at least. So, Sunny decided to wait until she was back to her usual self before broaching the topic.

With that, there was nothing for him to do.

Eventually, the Chain Breaker traveled far away from Twilight. They were still bathed in the beautiful blaze of the endless dawn, but the waters the graceful ship was braving had imperceptibly changed. They were surrounded by danger once more.

From here onward, there would be untold horrors hiding beneath the waves once more. The radiant sky would harbor terrifying abominations once more. And so, the members of the cohort would have to maintain vigilance at all times once more, ready to fight for their lives.

The mood aboard the Chain Breaker subtly changed.

That said… strangely, Sunny was not too concerned.

Perhaps it was arrogance, but looking at the seven people gathered on the graceful ship, he felt confident in their chances of at least reaching Verge unharmed.

Had there ever been a more deadly cohort of Masters? Surely not.

Kai and Effie were veterans of both the Forgotten Shore and the Antarctic campaign, with plenty of incredible feats under their belts. Soul Reaper Jet was one of the most feared individuals in the world, with even Saints being wary of her sinister blade. Cassie was someone whose lethality could not even be evaluated by mundane means.

And then there were Sunny, Nephis, and Mordret. The three wielders of Divine Aspects, unheard of in history. Their individual power was already outside the scope of what Masters were supposed to be capable of, and when put together…

If anything, Sunny should have felt concerned for their enemies.

Speaking of Mordret...

Sunny had wished to avoid him entirely, but having access to the well of knowledge the Prince of Nothing possessed was simply too tempting. Granted, the bastard lied as easily as he breathed, so anything he said had to be taken with a grain of salt.

In fact, as a rule of thumb, nothing Mordret said could be trusted. But Sunny still wanted to ask him a few questions, especially those that almost no one else could answer.

Mordret could usually be seen at the bow of the Chain Breaker, where Saint stood guard with Morgan's Warbow in her hands. He seemed to be very interested in the graceful stone knight, or maybe the bow she held. In any case, he could be found there most of the time.

Sunny left his usual spot under the branches of the sacred tree, walked past Ananke's ketch, and approached the Prince of Nothing. Sensing his gaze, Mordret looked up.

"Ah, Sunless. What a pleasant surprise. Did you want something?"

Sunny glared at him for a few moments, then sighed and summoned the Shadow Chair. Noticing it, Mordret raised an eyebrow, as if remembering something unpleasant.

"Uh-oh."

Sitting down, Sunny remained silent for a bit, then said evenly:

"Yeah, I did want something. Just… to chat for a bit."

He glanced at Mordret and asked, trying to keep his tone devoid of hostility:

"So, how is Ravenheart treating you?"

The Prince of Nothing gave him a curious look.

"Ah, you know. The weather is not great, but the people are really… charming. Well, you've met Seishan and Beastmaster, so you must have an idea. It's like I'm living in a flower garden."

Sunny smiled, nodded, and asked cordially:

"I see, I see… so, what are the Sovereigns up to? Are they really going to abandon the waking world?"

Chapter-1528: New Eden

Mordret studied him with a neutral expression. Then, he smiled pleasantly.

"How should I know? Am I a Sovereign?"

Sunny stared at him silently for a few moments. Eventually, he shook his head.

"No… but you are a son of one, was raised by another, and currently serve the third. If you don't know, then who would?"

Mordret laughed.

"Well, if you put it like that, it does sound like I should know. However, Sunless, you seem to be mistaken about something. The thing is… I don't care to know. Why should I care about the waking world? Whatever happens to it has little to do with me."

Sunny frowned.

Indeed, Mordret had spent most of his childhood in the Dream Realm, so he had little attachment to Earth. More than that, he was not someone who would care about the lives of hundreds of millions of innocent people, let alone feel inclined to do something to save them.

All Mordret cared about was his revenge against the Great Clan Valor.

A faint smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"Sure, you might not care about the waking world. But you do care about your father's plans — at least as far as to be able to try and ruin them better. So cut the crap and just tell me what you know. If

you don't mind."

Mordret stared at him with amusement for a while, then sighed and shook his head.

"Well, why not? But I'm afraid that you are overestimating me. I really do not know what my father and the Queen of Worms are planning. I am not exactly on speaking terms with the former, and the latter does not trust me enough to share such secrets. All I know is that they are serious about having a war with each other. That was why I joined Ki Song."

He lingered for a moment and added, his voice losing its usual lightheartedness:

"I'll warn you, though. Don't presume to understand the Sovereigns, Sunless. You might think that you have them figured out, but you don't. They are far older than we are, and far more powerful. They are also not some cardboard villains. My father, Ki Song, and the third one… are the most exceptional individuals of their generation, or maybe even of all generations.

They did not end up on their thrones by accident."

Sunny looked at him somberly.

"What are you trying to say?"

Mordret shrugged with a smile.

"I'm just saying that you might find it hard to understand their plans. Abandoning the waking world? Well, that surely sounds like something they would do. But if you think about it, why would they do that? Even if the Sovereigns only care about the Dream Realm, they still need Awakened to populate it. And Awakened cannot exist without mundane people.

You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, and you can't get a stable supply of eggs without a poultry farm. Something like that."

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking about what Mordret had said. Although the terms he used were very cynical, the underlying

message held true. Indeed, there had to be an immense population of mundane people for a comparatively small amount of Awakened to emerge.

If the waking world was indeed destined to be consumed by the Dream Realm, the Sovereigns could not allow themselves to abandon it completely before that happened.

Which went against what Sunny had learned about them before.

He frowned, feeling confused.

Eventually, Sunny shook his head and asked, his voice somber:

"What about the third one? Asterion, what does he want?"

As soon as those words were spoken, Mordret's smile dimmed, growing strangely… forced. He leaned forward slightly.

"Sunless… do me a favor, try not to speak that name aloud. Otherwise, he might actually hear you."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, staring at him incredulously.

"Come on. Really?"

Mordret let out a long sigh, then shook his head reproachfully.

"I'm not saying that to scare you, I'm just telling the truth. The old man… his powers are a bit beyond comprehension. If you feel threatened by Ki Song or my father, wait till you meet him. Better yet, hope that you never will."

Sunny leaned back, crossing his arms.

"What's so scary about him? If he's so powerful, why isn't he participating in this war Song and Valor started? Where is he? Come to think of it, where does he come from? There is almost nothing written about him in the history books. Is he a Legacy?

Does he have a clan? An army?"

Mordret shrugged.

"The thing you need to understand about him… is that his Domain is different from those of the other two. Yes, Domains can be different in nature. Most are like what my father and Ki Song possess, territorial. That is why Valor and Song are fighting over territory. But not his… his is more of an idea than a place."

He remained silent for a few moments, then said somberly:

"You must have realized by now that the Great Clans were built by those who inherited the Divine Lineages. Valor was born from the Lineage of War, Immortal Flame from the Lineage of Sun, House of Night from the Lineage of Storm. Clan Song rose to prominence later, after Ki Song discovered the Lineage of Beast.

The old man is the one who has the Lineage of Heart… however, there is no clan he belongs to. Do you know why that is?"

Sunny shook his head.

'The lineage of Heart God…'

Heart God was also the god of souls, as well as emotions, memory, hunger, and growth. What kind of Aspect could Asterion possess, then? What powers did he wield? What was the nature of his Domain?

Mordret took a deep breath, then smiled.

"Well… it's because he does not come from the Legacy Clans. Legacy Clans have been in power since before we were born, so we are conditioned to assume that it has always been like that. But, in fact, there were many powers competing for the right to shape the world as they saw fit, back in the chaotic time after the Spell first descended. Some more terrible than others.

The old man is the last remnant of one of those vanquished powers."

Sunny remembered hearing about that. From what he knew, the current system — with the government and the Legacy Clans maintaining the world order together — was established after several

other, fringe factions had been defeated by the first Legacies. Even with all the sins of the current regime, the ones that could have been would have been much more terrifying.

At least that was what he had been told by Wake of Ruin.

Mordret lingered for a moment.

"Ah, by the way… the old man is not that old, actually. It's just what I call him. The faction he comes from, you see, was a small group of the Path of Ascension zealots. Real fanatics, far more extreme than anyone you could have met among the Legacies.

Now, those people… they were really in favor of abandoning the waking world completely, believing that the Nightmare Spell was meant to pave the way for a new beginning. That the Dream Realm was a wild garden meant for a new breed of humans."

He shook his head.

"And they did abandon the waking world, establishing an isolated colony in the Dream Realm not long after the first Masters Ascended. The man who would one day become the third Sovereign… was actually born there. In fact, he was the first human child born in the Dream Realm. The original Dreamspawn."

Mordret smiled.

"Well, in any case. Those reclusive extremists did not last long. Their colony was eventually overtaken by Nightmare Creatures, and he was the only one who survived. In the end, he found his way to Bastion, met my father, was brought back to the waking world, and joined Broken Sword's cohort."

The Prince of Nothing looked at Sunny with a strange expression, then frowned.

"I hope that satisfied your curiosity. Ah, all this talking made me thirsty. I think I'll go find myself something to drink..."

He rose and moved to walk away, but then lingered for a moment.

Looking back, Mordret said in a friendly tone:

"Oh, by the way. I said before that you'd better hope to never meet that guy. Sorry… I don't think you'll have a choice. The old man, you see, is very interested in people with divine bloodlines. Considering your connection to Shadow, the only missing Lineage, he'll probably come find you someday.

Your precious Changing Star, as well, since there might not be another Dreamspawn anywhere in the two worlds."

With that, he smiled pleasantly and walked away, leaving Sunny alone.

The Chain Breaker continued moving west, the leaves of the sacred tree rustling gently in the wind.

Sunny stared silently at the vast expanse of the Great River, his head full of dark thoughts.

'...Goddammit.'

It was really unfair. He did not even have the Lineage of Shadow God — Blood Weave had greedily devoured it a long time ago.

Why did he have to deal with a mysterious and sinister Sovereign?

It was not as if Sunny did not have a host of other terrible problems he had to deal with already.

'Mordret might have been lying, as well.'

It was only then that Sunny thought back on their conversation and uttered a quiet curse.

The Prince of Nothing had talked for so long, but did not give a straight answer to a single question!

'That bastard...'

Chapter-1529: Worm of Doubt

The conversation with Mordret left Sunny in a somber mood. The bastard clearly knew more than he had deemed necessary to share, but the few pieces of information he did offer were… concerning.

However, Sunny did not dwell on the distant threat of the Sovereigns for long. He did not have the luxury of worrying about something waiting far in the future when there were lethal dangers waiting for him in the present…

Or past, technically, considering that Verge was situated far downstream, as close to the Source and the Estuary as the Seekers of Truth had been able to build it, before the Defilement was born.

Not long after he talked with Mordret, the Chain Breaker was attacked for the first time since leaving Twilight. The cohort dealt with the swarm of the Drowned with comparative ease, allowing him to collect a few soul shards and for Jet to replenish her reserves of essence.

After that, they maintained a battle-ready schedule at all times. Sunny's Shadows stood guard at different points of the ship day and night. Nephis and Cassie took turns steering the graceful vessel, keeping it at low altitude, sometimes just above the flowing water. Jet's crow and Kai scouted ahead for signs of approaching danger.

The most useful scout, however, was none other than Mordret. With his ability to perceive the world through reflections and the vast expanse of water around them, he could see far and wide, warning them of any suspicious movement far in advance.

They did not have to fight too often. Sometimes, danger came from below the water, and sometimes, it came from the sky. But most of the time, the Great River remained calm and peaceful, leaving them with plenty of free time on their hands.

Knowing that the cohort was drawing closer and closer to the inevitable attack on Verge with each passing day, Sunny threw himself into weaving.

There was a lot for him to do.

He had five Supreme soul shards, which meant that five of the Transcendent Memories the cohort possessed could be potentially elevated to a higher Rank. The first thing Sunny had to do was choose what Memories to alter.

He chose the first two rather quickly. They were the Transcendent armors Effie and Kai had received in the Second Nightmare — the former after slaying the Sun Prince, the latter after slaying the Ivory Lord, Dragon Sevirax.

Both were potent and possessed tremendously robust weaves, making the possibility of the alterations damaging or destroying them slim. Best of all, they were Memories of the First Tier, so a single soul shard was enough to change their Rank completely.

The third Memory Sunny decided on was somewhat of a harder choice — it was the Transcendent weapon of the Seventh Tier Nephis had received for slaying Soul Stealer.

The weapon, which could take many forms, possessed several insidious enchantments. In a sense, it was similar to the Cruel Sight, but much more versatile, destructive, and potent. Because of the similarities between the two silver blades, Sunny had an easier time studying its weave. Therefore, he had a better chance of transplanting a new nexus.

Sadly, transplanting seven was currently beyond his abilities — not that he had enough Supreme soul shards. However, Sunny decided to attempt isolating a single enchantment and supplying that enchantment alone with the power equal to that of a Supreme Memory — thus creating a strange and unheard-of Memory of a hybrid Rank.

The enchantment he chose was responsible for channeling elemental damage, as well as protecting the blade from harm. Considering

Neph's propensity for destroying her Memories with her own flame, or simply by exposing them to too much punishment, that single improvement would serve her very well in the future.

The remaining two Memories he decided to alter had also been received by Nephis in Twilight. Both of them were of Transcendent Memories of the First Tier — one was an arrow, while the other was a charm.

The arrow possessed a simple enchantment that enhanced the force delivered by its impact, and could also shape that force into a flat, severing field. The charm was a more complicated one, and served to enhance the material properties of other objects — making weapons sharper, armor more durable, and so on.

With that arrangement, two of his companions would be better protected, two would be capable of delivering more harm to the enemy, and one would be able to better support the rest of the cohort in any kind of situation.

With his plans set, Sunny began the work — studying the weaves of the chosen Memories in great detail, creating threads of shadow essence, and preparing himself for the alterations was going to take him a long while. He hoped to be done with the process by the time they reached Fallen Grace, and if that failed, then at least before they reached Verge.

Days passed with him being completely concentrated on the task. Strangely enough, studying the unfamiliar weaves also gave him some inspiration for his own unrelated project — the complicated puzzle of turning the Covetous Coffer into a semblance of an Echo.

For a while, Sunny was fully engrossed in the mysteries of weaving, not paying attention to anything else — except for occasional attacks on the Chain Breaker.

...Slowly, however, a note of dissonance invaded his focused mind. Sunny was reluctant to pay it much attention at first, but with each passing day, the worm of doubt that had entered his mind continued to grow harder to ignore.

Especially because the Sin of Solace did not miss any opportunity to remind him of that small contradiction.

The thought gnawing at Sunny's mind was a seemingly innocent question…

'How did Cassie survive the explosion that consumed Twilight?'

At first, he had not paid that detail any attention, simply being glad and relieved that the blind girl was alive. But the more time passed, the more it bothered Sunny, for some reason.

Except for Mordret, who had been sent back to his physical body, all members of the cohort had been thrown out of the mirror realm in approximately the same location — past the open space where they had met Soul Stealer, near the inner districts of the city.

From there, Nephis had made her way to the palace. Cassie, however, had somehow ended up near the gates of the city when the explosion happened. She then dove deep into the still water beyond the gates to save herself, as well as Effie and Jet, from the obliterating blast.

But how had she found herself all the way near the wall of Twilight?

It had to have been immensely difficult to fight her way through the flood of Soul Stealer's vessels and the remnant abominations of the Defiled horde. The distance between where the cohort had found themselves and the outer limits of the city was much greater than the distance to the palace…

Cassie couldn't have reached the water by accident. So how had she done it?

There was only one reasonable answer…

It was that Cassie's goal had always been to escape the city.

Which meant that she had known what would happen all along.

Chapter-1530: Blessing of Misfortune

Sunny was restless.

Cassie had survived, which brought him indescribable joy. He would have been… broken, if she had perished in Twilight. Nephis would have never forgiven herself for causing the death of her best friend, either.

Not to mention that Effie and Jet would have been killed, as well, making the heartbreaking tragedy simply unbearable.

So, it was the epitome of wonderful that Cassie had survived.

But how had she survived?

He did not know.

It was close to impossible for her to be driven all the way to the limits of the city by accident. Which meant that she had fought her way there on purpose.

Which meant that she knew what would happen.

…Which was also impossible.

Not even because Cassie would have shared such precious information with them, allowing the cohort to come up with a better plan, but simply because she was not capable of perceiving the past and the future in the Tomb of Ariel. She had told them so herself — all Cassie saw in her visions, ever since entering the Nightmare, was darkness.

That was what saved her from sharing the fate of the sybils, who had

all been Defiled by the visions of the Estuary. Here in the Tomb of Ariel, Cassie was blind to the future and the past. That was her saving grace.

She could not have known what would happen in Twilight. Otherwise, she would have been Defiled — and she wasn't Defiled. Sunny knew that because he could see Cassie's soul, and because she was still a carrier of the Nightmare Spell.

And yet she had to have known, somehow.

It made no sense at all.

Confused, he even remembered the eerie and nonsensical thought that had entered his mind after they escaped Aletheia's Island. That Cassie could have been able to remember the previous cycles of the Great River, just like the Mad Prince had.

Which would make her Torment.

But she couldn't be Torment for the same reason — if she was, Sunny would have been able to see the darkness of Corruption in her soul, and the Spell would have banished her from itself.

The strange incongruity gnawed at him more and more with each passing day.

The only reasonable explanation was that fate had played a trick on them. It was almost impossible for Cassie to have found herself near the gates of Twilight when the explosion happened — but only almost. She must have gotten incredibly lucky.

Sunny was no stranger to witnessing extremely improbable events. His entire life was full of them due to his [Fated] Attribute. This time, they must have received a blessing of fortune. There was no other sensible way to explain what had happened.

And still, still…

He was restless, plagued by doubt.

It was to the point that Sunny was having trouble concentrating on

weaving. He found himself glancing at Cassie furtively when she was nearby, and then felt ashamed for doubting one of his companions.

Not to mention that it was absolutely useless to try and spy on the blind girl secretly — because she could have been watching the world through his eyes, and would be aware of him looking at her.

In any case, Cassie seemed to be perfectly normal. Well… as far as the word normal could be applied to her. She was mostly quiet, but not alarmingly so. She usually kept to herself, but not to the point of avoiding others on purpose. Usually, she would take her turn controlling the Chain Breaker, then descend below deck to rest when Nephis replaced her on the steering oars.

When they were attacked, she participated in the battles, supporting the cohort from behind and stepping forward if there was a need. When everything was calm, she rested and went about her usual duties of maintaining the ship.

Of course, Sunny did not know what she was doing when nobody was watching. How could he?

Well, actually… he could.

Spying on the blind seer was not an easy matter, considering that she could see through the eyes of the potential spy and knew their every move. However, as far as Sunny knew, while Cassie could use her Ascended Ability on the members of the cohort, she could not do the same with his shadows.

She could also see through his eyes, if she wished to, but she could not see what he saw through the shadows.

So, if he wanted to, he could send one of the shadows to observe the blind girl, just in case there was something strange going on with her.

However, he wasn't sure that it was an appropriate thing to do.

Sunny was very peculiar about trust. It had taken him a long time to gain the ability to trust others, so he cherished it greatly. Being able to trust, and receiving trust in return — those were intangible, but precious things.

So, even if sending a shadow to observe Cassie wouldn't do the blind girl any harm, he would be breaking trust with her. Their relationship was complicated and tumultuous, and they had endured a lot together to repair it. He was reluctant to jeopardize that relationship…

But the Sin of Solace kept whispering into his ear, fanning the flames of Sunny's paranoia. In fact, the sword wraith did not whisper, but was incredibly loud with his insidious accusations and insinuations — especially so when Cassie was nearby.

She never reacted, which made it seem as though she was unable to hear the odious apparition.

…Or was pretending to not hear it masterfully.

'Just think about it rationally.'

It was hard for Sunny to be dispassionate when it came to Cassie, but this time, he had to be.

'We only made it this far because of Cassie. But if I remove our friendship from the equation… she has indeed been behaving strangely. And there are certain things about her actions that can be seen as suspicious, if a stranger evaluates them.'

Which did not mean that they really were suspicious… just that they could be.

Lowering all six of his hands, which had been weaving strings of shadow essence, Sunny frowned.

'In the end, it all comes down to a simple question. Do I want to be polite, or do I want to be safe?'

Seen in that light, his dilemma had a definitive solution.

It was much better to be safe than sorry.

After shaking his head, Sunny secretly sent one of his shadows to keep an eye on Cassie. He was almost entirely certain that he would not discover anything concerning.

But at least the little part of him that had been restless and concerned was calmed by that precaution, allowing him to return to his tasks with an easy heart.

He continued weaving.

Chapter-1531: Colors of the Sky

With his mind at ease, Sunny was able to get back to weaving. Due to the Crown of Twilight, he did not have to worry about running out of essence, and created threads of it with increasing speed.

The sight of him sitting all by himself, moving two sets of shadows hands in addition to his own pair, must have been extremely strange — especially because his companions could not see the tenebrous strings wrapped around his many fingers. But they were long used to the strange things Sunny did from time to time, so he was mostly left alone.

The Chain Breaker sailed duskward, slowly leaving the waters of endless dawn behind.

At the same time, Sunny was observing Cassie.

The blind girl did not do anything suspicious, assuaging his fears. Despite the poisonous accusations the Sin of Solace kept spouting into his ears, she was perfectly normal. Cassie spent half of the day steering the flying ship, then went about mundane tasks or rested in her cabin.

She maintained a calm and friendly demeanor while spending time with the other members of the cohort, albeit remaining slightly aloof. Cassie had become rather taciturn, at some point, but it was not as if she was reticent and went out of her way to not participate in any conversations.

It was just that she seemed content to listen quietly, most of the time, only voicing her opinions when there was a reason.

When Cassie was alone, she remained composed and collected. There was not much to do on the peaceful days, but she was seldomly idle. Without anyone noticing, the blind girl had taken it upon herself to

maintain the ship in pristine condition. Others had joined her belatedly, sharing the chores and menial tasks while chattering and joking.

The atmosphere on the washed decks of the Chain Breaker was harmonious and tranquil.

Cassie was only alone when she retreated to her cabin to sleep. Sunny felt more than a little bit weird — guilty, even — when sending his shadow to spy on the blind girl there. Of course, he made sure to look away when needed, so as not to see anything improper. But still, it was a strange situation.

Luckily, Cassie was not doing anything to give credence to the insinuations made by the Sin of Solace. The only peculiar thing Sunny discovered was that she had developed the habit of keeping a diary, at some point.

The blind girl had brought a leather-bound journal with her when they departed Fallen Grace, and was diligently leaving short notes on its pages before sleep. Sunny did not really want to read what she wrote, though.

He wouldn't have been able to read the journal even if he wanted to, anyway — not because Cassie did anything to make it hard for someone to gain access to it, but simply because she wrote in braille.

Apart from the leather-bound book, she had also brought a special slotted slate. The slate, which had probably been specially made for her by an artisan in Fallen Grace, consisted of two parts connected by a hinge. By opening the slate, Cassie could place a sheet of paper inside, and then poke holes in it with a stylus by following the slots.

Because of how proficient Cassie was with handling her Flaw, it was sometimes easy to forget that she was blind. But she was — her Aspect Abilities might have allowed her to negate some of the most debilitating sides of her condition, but the underlying cause remained.

When Cassie was alone, she could not borrow someone's vision to see the page. Her ability to sense what would happen a few moments

into the future could not help her see the path of ink on paper, either. So, in these private moments, she could only use such a method to read and write.

Separated from her by several bulkheads and the mass of the upper deck, Sunny looked away from the shimmering spellweave and gazed at the beautiful sky above him.

It was painted with a million vivid colors, rays of sunshine falling through the radiant clouds. The leaves of the sacred tree moved gently, making the tapestry of shadows etched into the wooden surface of the deck shift.

Looking down, he sighed quietly, and returned to his task.

Days passed slowly.

Eventually, they left the reaches of the Great River where dawn never ended. The sky gradually brightened, turning vast and perfectly blue. The nights were longer here, with water glowing softly in the absolute darkness of the absent stars.

As the Great River changed, the people sailing across its endlessly flowing surface changed, as well.

Kai finally did not seem disoriented anymore, having come to terms with the bizarre and incredible truth of the Third Nightmare. He quietly trained and prepared himself for the nearing battle, perhaps feeling remorseful about not sharing the hardships his friends had endured.

Jet was practicing and experimenting with her mist blade, capturing new souls every time the Chain Breaker was attacked. She was slowly figuring out how to use her deadly weapon to achieve truly harrowing results, which sometimes chilled even her allies.

Effie's belly was slowly growing. She spent most of her time helping the other members of the cohort with their tasks and preparing meals. The huntress remained cheerful and seemingly carefree, but Sunny could see somber emotions hiding behind that bright facade. She was distressed about the future of her child, and troubled

because she was not able to support her comrades more.

Mordret… was Mordret. It was impossible to tell what the bastard was thinking or feeling, but he seemed perfectly content with the situation.

The only thing that bothered him was that there were not enough living beings for him to kill, which prevented him from forming more soul cores, creating Reflections, and then sending the Reflections to slaughter and rampage on their own, thus nurturing their power.

Cassie remained her usual, unassuming self. Even with Sunny watching her closely, there was nothing especially notable about the blind girl. If anything, she seemed to be slowly growing more confident and energetic the further from Twilight they traveled.

And then there was Nephis.

It took a few weeks for her to recover from suffering the terrible torment of her Flaw and return to her usual self. Her eyes had regained their former liveliness, and her demeanor had shed the dispassionate emotionlessness of having her humanity burn away in the merciless flames.

Sunny felt relieved that Nephis was back to being herself. But he was also tense and troubled.

Because now that she was, he had no excuses to not talk to her anymore.

Chapter-1532: Unchanging

After an especially fierce battle against a swarm of aerial abominations, the deck of the Chain Breaker was slick with blood. Fiend was sitting near a pile of grotesque corpses, munching on them with shining eyes. The disturbing crunching sounds spread far and wide, making the members of the cohort throw disgusted looks at him.

The ravenous ogre paid it no attention, continuing his morbid meal in utter delight.

The flying ship had landed on the water, and was now swaying gently on the waves. Its sails were filled with wind, and steered by Neph's steady hand, it moved swiftly across the current.

Sunny had just finished inspecting the hull of the Chain Breaker to check if it had received any damage. Apart from a couple shallow scratches, everything seemed fine. Relieved, he gave Cassie the sign that it was alright, and went about helping Kai wash the blood off the deck.

The motions of cleaning the ship up after a battle were so familiar by now that he could have performed them with his eyes closed and his shadows gone.

Eventually, everything that needed to be done was done. The pile of corpses had disappeared, consumed by Fiend. The soul shards had been recovered and cleaned. The deck had been washed, the sails and masts had been checked.

The members of the cohort returned to what they had been doing before the Nightmare Creatures attacked. Effie was already starting to prepare dinner, and a delicious smell wafted from the galley.

The seven suns were falling toward the horizon.

Instead of returning to his usual spot and manifesting shadow hands to continue weaving threads of essence, Sunny hesitated for a while, then made his way toward the stern of the ship. There, Nephis was standing in the runic circle, holding the steering oars.

He leaned against the railing nearby and summoned the Endless Spring, taking a sip of the invigorating water.

They spent some time in silence. The silence between them had been comfortable once, but now, it was making Sunny feel burdened.

Eventually, he asked:

"How long do you think it will take us to reach Fallen Grace?"

Nephis looked at the sky, then shrugged.

"Five weeks? Maybe six. Depends on the wind and the obstacles we'll meet along the way."

He nodded. All in all, two months would have passed since the day they left Twilight by the time Fallen Grace appeared in sight. Which meant that he would have spent around nine in the Nightmare. The same went for Nephis, while Cassie… Cassie would be closing in on having been in the Tomb of Ariel for the better part of two years.

It would be five months for Effie and Jet, and two for Kai.

'What a mess.'

Sunny wasn't even sure how old he was exactly, anymore, especially in relation to the other members of the cohort. He was still shy of turning twenty-two by several months, at least.

After thinking about that for a bit, he asked:

"How do you think the people in Fallen Grace are doing?"

The citizens of Fallen Grace had been supposed to migrate it downstream after the news of the Defiled sybil's demise reached them. That would have allowed them to regain their youth, and maybe even usher in a new generation, with time.

But since Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had not bothered to stay back and check, there was no telling what actually happened.

'I wonder how that brat, Cronos, is doing…'

Nephis sighed.

"It's impossible to tell. After all, we don't know how much time we spent on Aletheia's Island and to traverse the vortex."

That was true, as well. Sunny only knew how many revolutions he endured after becoming aware of them, not how many deaths it had taken for him to learn the truth of the loop. Time had also acted extremely strangely in the depths of the Great River, when they were traveling through the vortex, and in the dark void beyond.

In a sense, the only member of the group who had experienced each day of the Nightmare normally, from start to finish, was Mordret.

But even he had no idea how long it had been since they entered the Tomb of Ariel — or rather, since they started this cycle of the Great River — because it was close to impossible to track the passage of time in the reflected version of Twilight, where it had been frozen.

All he knew was that he had played cat and mouse with Soul Stealer for a very long time before the Chain Breaker arrived.

Sunny remained silent for a while, trying to choose the correct words. But they weren't coming.

What was the point of words, anyway? If their troubles could be solved with words, they would have solved them a long time ago. Words were cheap, and actions spoke louder.

Some problems could not be solved at all.

He winced, then said the first thing that came to his mind:

"I wonder… how that brat Cronos is…"

"I'm sorry."

Neph's voice interrupted him, making Sunny flinch slightly. He glanced at her, surprised.

Nephis was looking ahead, at the horizon. Her motionless face was painted by the light of the descending suns. She remained silent for a moment, then sighed and turned to face him.

"I am sorry for making you dismiss your crown."

Sunny did not answer immediately. He kept quiet for a while, studying her face. His own expression was neutral, not exposing any of the swarm of emotions hiding behind it.

There it was, an apology. The conversation he had been delaying went much smoother than he had expected, arriving at what could very well be considered the best possible outcome.

But it did not solve anything.

So what if Nephis was sorry? It did not change what she had done. It did not change what she could do in the future, either. They could discuss it endlessly, expressing their reasons, feelings, intentions, and desires. But that fundamental truth would not change, making all else meaningless.

Perhaps it was just like the Sin of Solace had said. The only way to resolve this issue... was for Sunny to surrender.

But he did not know how to, and did not wish to surrender, either.

Eventually, Sunny sighed, as well.

Looking away, he nodded.

"...Yeah. I am sorry that you did that, too."

With that, he forced out a smile.

His smile was unconvincing, and a little joyless.

"But hey, what else were you supposed to do? At least you helped me save face. You might not have known it, but I was moments away

from trying to bite you. That… would have been really embarrassing. Not to mention bad for my teeth."

Sunny shook his head and pushed himself off the railing.

"Dinner is almost ready, so I'd better go. Cassie will take over from you soon. Come down before the food gets cold."

He waved at her and left.

The first of the seven suns fell into the Great River, drowning in its unfathomable depths. Far behind them, the sky was already turning dark.

The Chain Breaker continued sailing in the direction of the distant sunset.

Chapter-1533: Dusk Flower

Chain Breaker was sailing across the vast expanse of the Great River. With each day, the time of their inevitable arrival at Verge drew closer. Torment was waiting there, as well as the remnants of the Defiled horde. All dreadful and powerful adversaries, without a doubt.

Sunny felt a strange melancholy settle in his burdened heart… something he did not want to carry, and could not afford to feel. His mind had to be focused on the preparations for the nearing battle. The battle that was going to decide whether they would return home as Saints, or be buried forever in the dreadful darkness of the Tomb of Ariel.

So, he did what he did best. He put his feelings aside, and got to work.

Five Memories waited for him to alter them, each possessing a unique and complicated weave. Each was different from the Crown of Dawn, and called for a different approach.

The suits of armor Effie and Kai had received for slaying the two Chain Lords of the Ivory City were the easiest to deal with. Armor was meant to be durable, after all, and perhaps for that reason, the weaves of these Memories was robust and durable, as well.

Or maybe it was simply because of where they came from. In any case, Sunny had a good feeling about altering the Memories left behind by the two immortal Saints.

The deadly arrow and the helpful charm Nephis had received in Twilight were much more complicated. They were entirely different from each other, as well, which made the task of studying the weave of their enchantments harder.

But the most troublesome Memory by far was the Transcendent weapon of the Seventh Tier Nephis had received for slaying Soul Stealer. Not only was the weave of the silver blade infinitely more complex, but Sunny was also trying to do something he had never done before — replace a single nexus of a greater Memory and enhance only one of its enchantments, leaving the rest untouched.

More than that, the weave of the altered enchantment had to be completely isolated, so that the pressure of its more potent essence did not break the balance of the entire tapestry.

The elaborate puzzle of it all was driving him insane. Finding countless solutions to a myriad of problems demanded all of his attention.

Which was good. Sunny enjoyed being faced with problems that could actually be solved. He also liked not being able to dwell on other things too much, focusing entirely on a single task.

Days passed.

Turning into weeks…

The Chain Breaker braved the vast expanse of the azure sky and finally entered the reaches of the Great River where the world was eternally bathed in the crimson radiance of dusk.

They fought plenty of harrowing Nightmare Creatures on the way. Sunny was somewhat forced to swallow his previous confidence — yes, nothing managed to defeat the cohort or gravely wound any of the seven Masters. But they came close to being defeated on more than one occasion.

One time, the impregnable hull of the Chain Breaker was even breached. Luckily, they were flying above the currents at the time, so the ship did not take any water. But having to hastily patch the damaged section in the middle of a prolonged battle made everyone remember why arrogance was the quickest way to die in the unforgiving world of the Nightmare Spell.

Not long before the second month of their journey came to an end,

Sunny finally finished his work on the two suits of armor. Effie and Kai each had a Supreme Memory to protect them now, while Jet had her Legacy Relic. This made him feel better about the terrible battle that waited for them ahead.

Most of the preparatory work for the other three alterations had been complete, too. Sunny had plenty of essence strings at his disposal, as well as detailed knowledge of each of the three weaves. All that remained now was to carefully go over his plans, envision every step, and try to predict what could go wrong.

That was going to take him some time… but before that happened, the Chain Breaker finally arrived at Fallen Grace.

The arrival this time was different from the first.

Back then, neither Sunny nor Nephis had known what to expect from the last human city on the Great River. Therefore, they had been wary and ready for battle. He had even chosen to assume the form of the onyx serpent, following the graceful vessel from below the waves.

Many things were different now. The Chain Breaker was soaring above the water instead of resting on the currents. There were more people aboard.

Fallen Grace itself was different, too. Not only did it feel like an island of safety and peace in the ocean of perilous danger, but the city had also changed visibly.

It had indeed migrated further downstream, allowing the citizens to gain back their vitality. The first time Sunny and Nephis saw Fallen Grace, it was like a wilting white flower that floated on the crimson waves, bathed in the intense glow of the setting suns. There were still signs of deterioration hidden behind its beauty, but the white flower did not seem like it was dying anymore.

Instead, it looked to be recovering from a cured disease.

Many of the weathered buildings were being repaired. The sea of scarlet sails that helped Fallen Grace stay in place seemed freshly dyed. The island-ships were connected by solid bridges, and a few

new ones were being constructed at the edges of the city, with countless people working on their unfinished frames.

Above all else, the atmosphere of the last city had entirely changed. If it had been somber and stifled before, now it was brimming with vigor and vitality.

It was as if people who had no hope had suddenly regained belief in the future.

Seeing Fallen Grace like this was a stark reminder for Sunny. A reminder of what it was that they were fighting for.

Even though he had almost forgotten, they weren't fighting against the Defilement to merely survive, or even to conquer the Nightmare and become Saints.

They were fighting for these people. Their defeat would mean the end of the River Civilization, while their triumph would give the people of Fallen Grace a chance to rebuild and thrive once again.

Even if these men and women were merely phantoms conjured by the Spell, their joys and sorrows mattered.

But, more than that… they were a symbol of similar cities back in the waking world. The elegant canals of Fallen Grace were no different from the bustling streets on NQSC.

Making sure that they would not turn empty and desolate… that was the calling of the Awakened. The change that had happened to this floating city served to illustrate what the triumphs or failures of Awakened truly meant.

Standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Sunny took a deep breath.

'We will destroy Verge and conquer this Nightmare.'

He had promised to do so. He had promised to do so thrice.

Soon, he would have the chance to make good on his promise.

Chapter-1534: Rejuvenated

The Chain Breaker landed on the water and cut across its surface, approaching a familiar pier. Just like in the past, there was a crowd of people watching the graceful ship approach.

Sunny remembered the last time he had seen these people… it was when he, Nephis, and Cassie were departing from Fallen Grace, on their route to find and rescue the other members of the cohort. Thousands of gaunt, solemn old men and women had gathered on the piers on that day to see Dusk, their protector and savior, leave.

Perhaps to never return.

What was it that Cassie had said back then, after breaking her golden chains in a striking and decisive manner?

She had said that they would gather powerful Outsiders, vanquish the Defilement, and usher in a new era. An era of freedom and grace. That she knew it to be true.

Sunny had been a bit surprised by her impassioned proclamation and jokingly asked if she had seen a vision of fate. To which Cassie had responded…

'Who cares about fate? If fate is against us… we'll break it.'

As if it was easy, to break fate.

Looking back, that speech was really out of character for the quiet, reserved young woman. Sure, she had been putting on a show to give the people of Fallen Grace hope. But why did it seem that Cassie had been much more alive… much more herself in those few moments than ever since?

Sunny sighed, feeling a tentative smile find its way to his face.

Well… she had not been wrong.

They had indeed gathered powerful Outsiders, against all odds. Three Masters had left Fallen Grace, but seven of them returned. Which might not have seemed like much, if one did not know what they had gone through to reach that conclusion.

Much more important was the fact that, while their number had swelled, the number of their enemies had dwindled. Devouring Beast, Undying Slaughter, Soul Stealer, and the Dread Lord were gone. The Mad Prince was gone, too, and so only one of the Six Plagues remained.

Would Cassie's promise to vanquish the Defilement come true, as well?

'We'll make it come true.'

Feeling a newfound sense of determination, Sunny looked at the people crowding the pier. Now that the Chain Breaker had drawn closer, he could see them better.

Even though he knew what to expect, the sight still startled him.

'Huh…'

Gone were the gaunt, wrinkled faces. Gone were the hunched backs, blurry eyes, and lifeless white hair. Instead of thousands of old men and women, thousands of vigorous youths were staring back at him, their bright eyes full of vibrancy and life.

"It's Lady Dusk! Our Lady!"

"Our Lady has returned!"

"Look! That is Lord Sunless! They're back!"

"W—was that ship flying?!"

"There are people on the deck!"

The wind brought over a choir of excited voices. Kai, who was

standing near Sunny, gave him an amused look and smiled.

"Why do I feel like I'm preparing for the opening song of a comeback concert?"

The charming archer scratched the back of his head and added in a confused tone:

"Ah… it must be because there's a crowd of excited teenagers in front of me. Old instincts are kicking in."

Sunny gave him a strange look, remembering that his friend's life was perhaps the strangest of everyone aboard the Chain Breaker. And that was saying a lot, considering that there was a dead woman and Mordret among them.

Finally, the Chain Breaker reached the pier. The ship was tied in place, and then a wooden gangway was lowered to allow its passengers to disembark. Cassie descended first, causing the crowd of people to explode with cheers.

The citizens of Fallen Grace seemed beyond themselves at the sight of their sybil. Their youthful faces were beaming with wide smiles, and their eyes glowed with excitement.

However, they were also full of curiosity, which was why their gazes moved away from the blind girl soon.

It was not everyday that Outsiders came to Fallen Grace — in fact, many or even most of these people had only seen such an event once. Recognizing Sunny and Nephis, the crowd exploded with cheers once more. Sunny felt a little overwhelmed by that warm welcome.

Then, the youths gathered at the pier looked at the other members of the cohort curiously.

Kai caused a bit of a stir in the crowd, just as expected. Wearing his ivory armor, with his auburn hair tousled by the wind and an irresistible smile on his face, the charming archer waved shyly at the youths, causing many to sway.

The warmth of his smile was in sharp contrast to the chilly aura

emanated by Jet. Wearing a cold expression, she walked down the gangway and pierced the crowd with a grim look of her icy blue eyes. The volume of the cheers died down a little… but a different kind of gleam ignited in the eyes of many people. Especially the young men.

Sunny shook his head, knowing precisely how they felt.

Mordret's appearance also caused a strong reaction. Although not as charming as Kai and not as striking as Jet, he was nevertheless the most enigmatic and mysterious of the group. His easy smile, mirror-like eyes, and the slight feeling of wrongness hiding in their reflective depths made for a magnetic impression.

If only these people knew that they were looking at a deranged monster who would not hesitate to slaughter them all to form a few soul cores, as long as he could get away with it.

…Strangely enough, though, the most memorable impression was not made by Kai, Jet, or Mordret. Nor was it made by Cassie, Sunny, or Nephis.

Instead, it was Effie who elicited the strongest reaction from the people of Fallen Grace.

After two months of sailing across the Great River, her belly grew even larger than it had been before. The boisterous huntress had lost most of her former poise and grace. In fact, simply walking was tough for her.

Supporting her belly with one hand and using a spear as a walking staff with another, Effie cautiously descended the gangway and looked at the crowd of youths with a bright smile.

Her appearance caused all of them to grow silent.

Sunny could not understand why, at first, but then realized that the people of Fallen Grace must not have seen a pregnant woman in a long, long time. Before, they were banished upstream, turning old and decrepit. In fact, they must not have seen anything like that for a while before that, as well — among the River People, pregnant women could only be seen in the House of Youth.

Looking at Effie must have been like looking at the promise of having a future, for them.

The huntress leaned toward Sunny and whispered, her smile becoming a little strained:

"Doofus… why are they all staring at me?"

He cleared his throat, not knowing how exactly to answer that question.

Eventually, Sunny said:

"It's because they are happy."

Effie chuckled.

"Oh…"

She turned to the crowd and waved.

"I guess I should be happy then, too."

Chapter-1535: Seven Heroes

The members of the cohort were standing on the pier, surrounded by a crowd of people. Because of how strange the lives of the Riverborn were, all these people seemed to be very young… Sunny was not that old himself, and yet, he couldn't help but feel that he was a seasoned elder looking at countless children.

The glint of awe and admiration in their eyes did nothing to lessen the impression. He remained motionless for a few moments, feeling strangely burdened by their gazes.

The members of the cohort had different reactions to the warm welcome they received from the citizens of Falling Grace, ranging from nonchalance to embarrassment. It was at that moment that Cassie took a step forward and spoke, her voice rising above the crowd:

"People of Fallen Grace… after being apart for so long, we finally meet again."

She smiled, and the crowd of youths exploded with exhilarated cheers. The blind seer leaned on her white staff, waiting for them to calm down, then raised it slightly.

"I am Dusk of Fallen Grace. And today, I return home bearing the sacred relic of our city, the Guiding Light bestowed upon us by the gods themselves!"

Sunny felt a bit odd observing her speak to her people. The sight of Cassie right now was so different from how she had been before. He knew it better than anyone else, because his shadow had been following the blind girl for the past two months.

Cassie was usually quiet, reserved, and unassuming. Even when surrounded by people, her presence was subtle to the point of being

unnoticeable, sometimes making it hard to remember that the blind girl was there.

That was only because Sunny was accustomed to her company, of course — most people would find it hard to ignore the presence of such an exquisitely beautiful Ascended. Still, Cassie was not someone who enjoyed attention. On the contrary, she seemed to be in the habit of avoiding it.

Which was why he felt strange watching her command the attention of a large crowd, and do it so seamlessly at that. Cassie played the role of a confident leader so effortlessly that it made him question what other parts of her personality were an act.

'Calm down. That is the Sin of Solace talking, not you.'

Unaware of his thoughts, the blind girl lowered the Guiding Light and continued, the crowd hanging on her every word.

"I return in the company of mighty Outsiders, as well. These brave warriors have come from all across the Great River to help us battle against the vile curse of the Defilement. Please, help me welcome them to Fallen Grace, the last stronghold of humanity under the seven suns!"

She turned slightly and gestured to the members of the cohort, calling out their names one after another:

"I bring Nightingale, the Dragonslayer, who felled the harrowing Dread Lord! I bring Jet, the Soul Reaper, who put an end to Undying Slaughter! I bring Lady Nephis, the Changing Star, whose holy flames vanquished Soul Stealer! I bring Mordret, the valiant prince of a distant land, and huntress Athena, whose spear always strikes true!"

She faced Sunny. Did he imagine it, or had her expression changed subtly, for a fleeting moment?

"...And Lord Sunless, the heir of the Serpent King, who broke the chains of time and brought down the dreadful citadel of the First Seeker!"

'What the hell…'

Sunny was a bit surprised by that introduction. Yes, he wore the crown of King Daeron, and yes, he had technically played a vital part in destroying Aletheia's Island — which used to be the stronghold of the woman who had become known as the First Seeker.

But wasn't that a little bit too much?

Cassie, meanwhile, turned back to the crowd.

"The Dread Lord is no more. Undying Slaughter is no more. Soul Stealer is no more. Devouring Beast is no more, and so is the Mad Prince! The heroes standing in front of you have already dealt a decisive blow to the harrowing forces of the Defilement, spilling the profane blood of its most dreadful champions!"

She paused for a moment, and then continued, her voice swelling with confidence and passion:

"And just like we broke and vanquished the Plagues, we will break the walls of Verge, and vanquish the First Seeker! We will destroy the source of the Defilement and bring peace to the Great River, allowing human cities to flourish once more! I, Dusk of Fallen Grace, promise this to you!"

If the crowd of youths was excited and elated before, Cassie's impassioned speech truly made their hearts ignite. A wave of voices slammed into the cohort like a tide, echoing above the waves.

Even Sunny couldn't help but feel the impact of the blind girl's words. He had already known everything she shared with the people of Fallen Grace, and yet, presented in such a light, the situation truly did seem worthy of being celebrated.

Had he allowed his pessimism to get the better of him?

No… no, he had not. Cassie might have wanted to reassure these poor people, who had been at the mercy of the Great River for so long, but he knew better.

Sure, five of the six Plagues were no more, and sure, the cohort had a perfect weapon against the horrid power of the First Seeker — Nephis. But the Nightmare was far from over, still. Torment

remained, and so did the remnant forces of the Defilement under her command.

Verge still existed, somewhere far away. It was where the Defilement had started, and would therefore be the most harrowing of all the places they had visited on the Great River, without a doubt.

But still…

Perhaps, he could allow himself to relax and believe in a better future, at least for a day.

Looking at the sea of delighted youths, Sunny took a deep breath and smiled.

'There won't be opportunities to smile and celebrate later. So… I better take this chance to enjoy some peace.'

Leaning down a little, he whispered in Cassie's ear:

"Since when are you so good at addressing crowds?"

She remained silent for a moment.

"Since I found myself in charge of a crowded city, I guess?"

Smiling, Cassie shook her head and took a step forward. The mass of people parted before her like a sea.

Chapter-1536: Future Youths

There was a squad of soldiers on the pier, as well, all wearing white armor tied at the waist with red sashes. Unlike the last time Sunny had seen them, the warriors filled their armor well, brimming with vigor and vitality.

Their captain was a tall, beautiful woman with fiery red hair. Sunny only recognized her because of an open helmet with a scarlet plume she was holding on the bend of her right arm… she was the captain that had escorted him and Nephis to the temple the last time around.

She had seemed ancient then. Now, she looked not much older than they were. Everyone here did, really, or even younger. The startling change was still making him feel a little dizzy.

Sunny had known, of course, that killing the Defiled sybil would allow Fallen Grace to migrate downstream and return these people their youth. Knowing and seeing were two different things, however.

Seeing them like this was a bit… bittersweet. Sweet because it was nice to witness his actions doing some good, bitter because it reminded him of Ananke.

As Sunny was pondering the strange reality of living on the Great River, the soldiers created a passage through the crowd and surrounded the members of the cohort, helping them leave the pier.

They were escorted along the familiar streets once again, moving toward the temple of Dusk. There had been a lot of people on the pier, but there were even more here, crowding the sidewalks and the roofs of the buildings, all staring at the returned Outsiders with excitement and awe.

The crowd followed the small procession, constantly growing. Some people were calling out to Cassie, some simply cheered from a

distance. After the relative tranquility of months spent at sea, Sunny was having trouble adjusting to the boisterous atmosphere of Falling Grace.

"Lord Sunless! Lord Sunless!"

He turned his head, hearing his own name.

The voice was unfamiliar, and the face of the scrawny teenager calling out to him was unfamiliar, too. But Sunny recognized those curious, intelligent eyes almost immediately.

He frowned slightly, but was actually amused.

"Cronos? Is that you, brat?"

The teenager, who had been kept away by the captain of the soldiers, grinned:

"Yes! It's me. Lord Sunless, welcome back!"

Sunny smiled, then nodded at the captain, signaling that it was alright to let the young man approach. A few moments later, Cronos joined the procession and looked at the other members of the cohort with wide eyes.

"Lord Sunless… are these Outsiders, as well?"

Sunny nodded.

"Sure. That one, I found in a well once. That one is a freeloader who likes to invite herself into other people's houses. That one is in the habit of giving young men like us weighty slaps, so be on guard around her. Oh, and that one is a monster wearing human skin… don't trust anything he says, and never look him in the eyes. They are all incredible warriors, though.

There is no one more qualified to fight the Defiled here in the Tomb of Ariel, that's for sure."

Hearing those descriptions, the members of the cohort gave him sour looks. Effie shook her head.

"How come Cassie's introductions are so much better?"

Cronos stared at her belly with a curious gaze. Noticing it, she grinned.

"What, do I need to give another talk… no, wait. You can be a hundred years old, for all I know. How old are you, kid?"

The teenager chuckled awkwardly.

"Oh… I'm eighteen, my lady. Sorry, I didn't mean to stare."

'Eighteen…'

The last time Sunny had seen Cronos, he had been seventeen. So they had not spent that much time away — much less than he feared, at least. It had been no more than a month of two, at most, before he remembered himself on Aletheia's Island.

The teenager, meanwhile, blushed in embarrassment.

"It's just that my wife and I, we were thinking of going to the House of Youth ourselves… since it was rebuilt recently… ah, but it's probably not a good idea, still."

Hearing that, Sunny almost stumbled.

"What… wait… since when do you have a wife?!"

Cronos laughed again.

"Right, you don't know! Well… we knew each other for a while. But since we were both old and decrepit, there was no point in anything except for quiet friendship between two elderly folk. Once the city migrated downstream, and we were both suddenly young once again… well, one thing led to another..."

He scratched the back of his head bashfully.

"Actually, there are many new families in Fallen Grace. We all thought for a long time that we would be the last generation of the River People. But, now… it's a bit strange? People are actually

looking forward to the future."

The captain of the soldiers, who had been listening to the conversation silently, gave him a reproachful look.

"You are too young to go to the House of Youth, brat. In fact… you should still be in the House of Youth! Not as a parent, but as a child. Spend a few decades growing up before thinking about acting like an adult and starting a family."

She seemed to be from a generation that had experienced things properly, unlike Cronos, who had turned into an old man before reaching adulthood, and was only now learning how to be young.

Effie observed them with a perplexed expression, then glanced at Sunny and winked.

"You hear that, doofus? This guy is eighteen and has already proposed to his girlfriend. What were you doing at eighteen?"

Sunny gave her a dubious look.

"You should remember it well, no? I had just helped Nephis win a bloody civil war, and then led all the surviving Dreamers of the Dark City to safety while the sky was more or less literally falling on our heads."

Cronos stared at him incredulously for a moment, then suddenly asked, his voice full of curiosity:

"How terrible! Does the sky fall often, outside?"

Effie laughed.

"More often than you would think, when this guy is around…"

Chapter-1537: Last Testament

Eventually, the cohort reached the familiar island-ship that carried a beautiful palace of white stone — the Temple of Dusk. Sunny had spent enough time under its roof to feel a hint of nostalgia at the sight of it. That was where he and Nephis had felt both hopeful and wary before their first meeting with the fabled sybil of Fallen Grace, only to meet Cassie instead.

The blind girl's two Ascended guards were waiting for them at the entrance to the temple. Unlike the other citizens, they had not changed as drastically. Both looked much younger, true, but were still mature and taciturn. Their composed faces did not betray any emotion when they bowed deeply to Cassie, but he could sense the deep care and reverence in their gazes.

Despite that, the two seasoned warriors still wielded the macabre symbols of their duty to not only protect their lady from any danger, but also protect the city from the lady, if need be. The woman wielded an unsheathed greatsword, while the man held a crimson silk cord.

Cassie greeted them both warmly, not paying any attention to the tools they were prepared to use to end her life.

With that, the cohort was ushered to a hall where a feast had already been prepared. The leaders of the different forces within the city were gathered there, waiting to meet their returned ruler — and the champions she had brought back from her journey.

The next few hours were a bit tedious for Sunny. He enjoyed the food and the beverages while listening silently to the conversation.

They had been gone from Fallen Grace for just shy of eight months. Around one month had been spent to reach Aletheia's Island, three or four to escape it, one more to reach Twilight, and the last two

months to come back.

During that time, the city had migrated downstream after receiving the news that the Defiled Sybil and her Drowned minions were eliminated. There had been no major attacks on Fallen Grace since, although the Awakened warriors left to protect it — and a few Masters, as well, including the two deaf guards — had fought against many wandering Nightmare Creatures.

Luckily, those had been feral abominations, not war parties of the Defiled. The defenders of the city had been able to either slay or chase the monsters away without letting them damage the island-ships.

Fallen Grace was indeed doing much better than it had when Sunny and Nephis first reached it. That was already apparent after their walk to the temple, simply from all the activity and repair work they had noticed on the streets. The city felt... invigorated. The reports of the leaders of the city only confirmed what they already knew.

Cassie seemed gratified to hear that Fallen Grace, which she had cared for in solitude for an entire year, was doing well. A rare bright smile found its way onto her face, reminding Sunny of how earnest and soft-hearted the blind girl had been once… a long time ago.

In turn, she shared the story of their journey — a somewhat simplified and embellished version of it, at least — with the leaders of Fallen Grace.

Then came the part of the conversation that these people had been waiting for with bated breaths. Without wasting any time, Cassie announced that she would be departing again shortly. This time, to lead the group of Outsiders she had gathered to attack Verge and rid the Great River of the curse of the Defilement once and for all.

The people gathered in the hall seemed stunned to hear that. Not only were they struggling to conceive of the fact that such a thing was even possible, they were also startled and heartbroken to learn that their lady would be leaving mere days after returning home from a long and harrowing journey.

But there was no way around it. The cohort was determined to only spend as much time in Fallen Grace as was needed to perform light repairs on the Chain Breaker — a week, at most.

There was no point in staying longer. It would only give Torment — who was a potent seer herself — more time to prepare for their arrival.

More than that, they were on a timer.

Effie's pregnancy was nearing the end stage. She was already close to eight months along… if they lingered in Fallen Grace, her child could be born on the way to Verge.

Nobody knew if the child conceived in the waking world would become Riverborn or not, so they did not want to risk it.

"I see that you are concerned."

Cassie's voice was soft as she addressed her people.

"And although you hide it well, you are also frightened that after I leave this time, you will never see me again. That this will be our final farewell."

She smiled gently.

"...You might very well be right. I might never return."

Her words caused a deathly silence to settle in the hall. The people of Fallen Grace were looking at their sybil with complicated expressions, a storm of emotions raging in their eyes.

Sunny suppressed the desire to sigh.

It was true that Cassie would never return. Whether they lived or died, she would never see these people again — because victory in Verge meant the end of the Nightmare. Once the First Seeker was destroyed, the cohort would go back to the waking world.

And the inhabitants of the Nightmare… actually, Sunny did not know what would happen to them. Perhaps would they cease to exist the

moment the Spell announced its appraisal.

Cassie shook her head slightly.

"But that is alright. Even if I don't return, Fallen Grace will live on. It has been protected by me and my sisters for a long time… but nothing lasts forever in this world. A time will come when there will be no sybils left in the Tomb of Ariel. A time will come when there will be no Outsiders left, either. Only the River People will remain.

That is you. You must carry the torch of humanity into the future, with or without me. You must persevere, endure… and thrive."

She paused for a moment, then added, her voice growing harsher:

"That is what I expect from you all. Don't disappoint me."

Hearing her words, the Riverborn gathered in the temple looked down with solemn expressions.

Sunny sighed.

The Spell was a cruel thing, indeed. It threw them into Nightmares and tasked them with changing fate. But what they strived to change was just an illusion.

It would have been great if they were in the real Tomb of Ariel, changing the lives of real people.

But, sadly, time — and fate — did not work that way.

What had happened was set in stone, and could not be changed.

Not by mortals like them, and not in a Nightmare.

...Or, at least, not in a Third Nightmare.

Chapter-1538: Lord's Wisdom

While the Chain Breaker was receiving light repairs, the members of the cohort were left to their own devices. Those who had never been to Fallen Grace spent time exploring its island-ships and getting to know the locals. Cassie was busy arranging things for when she was gone.

Sunny… Sunny did not really want to look at the beautiful city of eternal dusk. It made him wistful, and so, he threw himself back into weaving, knowing that there was not much time left.

He did, however, continue to observe the blind girl through one of his shadows — out of habit more than anything else, by now, since she had never done anything to confirm the accusations made by the Sin of Solace in the past two months.

He also sent one of his shadows to keep an eye on Mordret. Sunny was certain that Cassie was doing the same, as well — the Prince of Nothing could not be trusted to be on his best behavior in a city full of people. Especially people who were inhabitants of a Nightmare, and therefore no different from his countless victims in the Kingdom of Hope.

But Mordret did not seem inclined to go on a massacre in Fallen Grace. In fact, he was mostly interested in its myths and legends, of all things, spending his days talking to people on the streets and listening to their stories.

The people seem to enjoy his company.

On the third day of their stay in the last human city, Sunny successfully altered the Transcendent arrow Memory Nephis had earned in Twilight, elevating its Rank to Supreme.

The onerous process of transplanting a new nexus and reinforcing the

weave to withstand it left him drained and fatigued. So, Sunny decided to let himself rest and left the temple, eventually finding his way to the edge of the island-ship.

Sitting down there, he observed the busy canals of Fallen Grace and allowed his tired mind to rest.

It was not long after that when Cronos found him, brimming with endless curiosity, just like always.

Today, however, the teenagers at least tried to keep it in check. Noticing his strange behavior, Sunny raised his eyebrow and asked:

"What's on your mind?"

The young man hesitated for a while, but eventually asked:

"Lord Sunless… I heard that you won't be returning from Verge. Is it true?"

Sunny looked at him, frowning a little. Then, he looked away and sighed.

"Sure. We aren't planning to die, mind you. It's just that we are Outsiders. Once the Defilement is destroyed, it's back to the Outside for us."

Cronos seemed saddened by that response. He stared at the water dejectedly.

"What is it like, really? The world outside Ariel's Tomb? What are you going to do after leaving here?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Indeed, what would he do after leaving the Nightmare? He had no idea. It was hard to tell, considering that the state of Antarctica — and the waking world in general — was entirely unknown.

The war between Valor and Song would probably grow more intense. The Nightmare Gates would continue to pop into existence, slowly consuming the waking world and making it a part of the Dream

Realm. No matter how much Sunny wanted to simply live a good life, he knew that these events would not let him remain a bystander.

After a few moments of silence, he shrugged.

"Well, it's more or less the same. There is no Defilement, but there is still Corruption. Nightmare Creatures are running around devouring people, so Awakened like me need to keep them in check. So I'll probably be battling some hideous abomination every other day, cursing loudly. That's life for you. The secret to a happy life, though, is to do all these things in good company.

Oh... and in a place with good plumbing."

He glanced at the teenager and smiled.

"Why? What are you going to do after we get rid of the Defilement? Are you really going to the House of Youth?"

Cronos laughed awkwardly.

"Well… I will, eventually. But probably not just yet."

He looked into the distance, at the bustling streets of Fallen Grace, and sighed.

"In truth, I've been sensing my soul essence recently, a bit. So I'll probably work on forming a soul core and becoming an Awakened. Even if you and the other lords and ladies defeat the First Seeker and vanquish the Defilement, there will still be corrupted creatures left, threatening our city. Someone has to defend it after you leave."

Cronos smiled.

"Plus, I've always been interested in how the city works. All these people, all these moving parts… it's a bit of a miracle that a place like Fallen Grace can exist, don't you think? Lady Dusk has always been taking care of us. What are we going to do without her?"

His eyes turned cloudy for a moment, but then shone brightly once again. Wiping them, he smiled again.

"I want to make sure that Fallen Grace continues to exist… and thrive, just like she told us to. For myself, my wife, and our future children. Ah, but I'm just some brat. So, I figured I should become really strong first. Like you, Lord Sunless! So that people had no choice but to listen to what I had to say."

Sunny looked at him incredulously.

Cronos was, indeed, just some brat. But all great people whose deeds shaped history had been brats, once. Would this kid become a great leader, one day? Would his actions shape the future of Fallen Grace, and create a world where his children could grow up safe and happy? Would the stories of his deeds become legends, one day?

Or would he disappear without a trace once the Nightmare was complete?

Sunny forced himself to smile.

"Strong like me? Brat, do you think people actually listen to what I have to say? Stronger! Become much stronger than me. Then, they'll listen."

With that, he patted the teenager on the shoulder and rose to his feet.

The charm Memory waited to be altered. The day of their departure from Fallen Grace was drawing near.

"Stronger than you, my lord? B—but... no, that's just unreasonable!"

Sunny looked at the startled youth with a smile, then shook his head and headed away.

"Then be unreasonable!"

Imparting Cronos with that piece of questionable wisdom, he returned to the temple and spent a few sleepless hours going over his plans for altering the Transcendent charm. He felt that he had already accounted for everything that could go wrong… so he would probably be ready to start the process once his essence was replenished by the Crown of Twilight.

Just when the night fell, however, something distracted him from the preparations.

After wasting its time for months, the shadow that had been following Cassie finally noticed something strange about her movements.

Chapter-1539: Sybil's Secrets

Sunny was in his quarters, going over the plan for altering the Transcendent charm. Outside, Fallen Grace was bathed in the beautiful glow of the iridescent water. The short night had descended on the world, shrouding the sky in absolute darkness.

In that dark hour, Cassie was walking along the corridors of the temple — which wasn't that strange, in and of itself, if not for the fact that she was alone. Usually, the two deaf guards would be following behind her, but they were nowhere to be seen.

The only thing accompanying the blind girl was the shadow Sunny had sent to keep an eye on her.

Back in his quarters, he straightened and frowned, distracted from envisioning the complicated tapestry of the charm's spellweave.

'What is she up to?'

Cassie had not given him any reason to feel worried in these past two months… honestly, monitoring her movements was an afterthought by now. Sunny had certainly hoped that it would remain that way.

Feeling a bit somber, he glanced at the motionless figure standing a few meters away. The Sin of Solace was staring at him silently, not bothering to say anything. However, his gaze expressed more than enough.

Sunny winced, then looked away.

"Don't you glare at me. I'm sure it's nothing."

He said that… but did not command the shadow to back away. Instead, he dedicated more of his attention to observing Cassie.

The blind girl certainly did not seem pensive or secretive. She calmly walked along the winding stone corridors, tracing her fingers on the wall. Her other hand was holding the leather-bound journal.

'Maybe her guards are asleep.'

Sunny returned to considering the weave while keeping an eye on Cassie.

She walked for quite some time, eventually entering the part of the temple that he was not familiar with. These chambers were used for preparing for public rituals, so Sunny had no business being there. Cassie, on the other hand, seemed very familiar with that area of the temple.

She made a few more turns and stopped in front of an unassuming wooden door. A mundane-looking key appeared in her hand. Unlocking the door, Cassie entered a narrow staircase that led down, spiraling.

Sunny's frown deepened.

'What the hell?'

She was already on the first floor of the temple. Why was there a way further down, into the frame of the island-ship?

But then again, maybe it was normal. The human cities on the Great River were kept in place by various means, ranging from sails and windcatchers to sorcerous mechanisms. Perhaps Cassie was on her way to inspect the moving parts of one such mechanism.

She descended the stairs for some time before entering a dark and damp network of service tunnels running under the temple. Sunny had not known that there were such corridors there, but it made sense. The mechanisms responsible for allowing the island-ship to resist the current had to be inspected and repaired from time to time.

Fallen Grace, especially, was reliant on such mechanisms. It was situated not too far from the Edge, after all, and so the pull of the current was more powerful here.

Cassie walked along the dark corridors for a little bit and unlocked another door, entering a small chamber.

Sunny was suddenly unable to concentrate on weaving anymore. His face darkened.

The chamber was just what he had expected it to be — it housed a complicated mess of gears and chains that spun and moved, transferring the energy from the wind and the enchantment circuits into the underwater wheels that kept the island-ship stationary. It was a bit like entering the insides of a tower clock, if that tower clock had been built with the help of sorcery.

In a sense, Sunny was looking at the River Civilization's version of spelltech.

However, that was not what attracted his attention.

The chamber and the intricate gears were what he had been expecting to see. What he had not expected, however, was that the floor of the chamber was broken, creating a rough, circular well.

The menacing hole certainly did not look like something that had been planned by the builders of the temple. Instead, it looked like something that had been created much later, and much more violently.

He could hear the sounds of flowing water coming from its dark depths.

'...Why is there a well at the bottom of the Temple of Dusk?'

His shadow hid in the darkness of the underground chamber, observing Cassie carefully.

The blind girl did not seem surprised by the presence of the strange well. Neither did she pay it any attention. Locking the door behind her, she circled around the open chasm and approached the opposite wall of the chamber. There, hidden behind a throng of spinning gears, a simple desk stood near the wall, with several chests and cabinets surrounding it.

The underground chamber was absolutely dark, and there were no lanterns anywhere in sight. Of course, Cassie had no need for them. Coming closer to the desk, she lingered for a few moments, facing it with a distant expression.

Then, she moved past it and kneeled near one of the chests, placing a hand on its heavy lid. Several strings of runes ignited on the wooden surface, and the chest opened noiselessly, revealing what was stored inside it.

Sunny tilted his head, his expression turning somber.

Inside the chest… were leather-bound journals, just like the one Cassie was carrying. Dozens of them, or maybe even hundreds. There were several chests like that one in the underground chamber, as well, all locked with sorcerous locks.

The blind girl remained motionless for a while, then sighed deeply and placed the last journal on the pile.

Then, she closed the lid of the chest, kept her hand on it for a few moments, and rose.

Turning away, she approached the edge of the dark well and lowered her head, listening to the sounds of the flowing water with a distant expression.

Cassie stood there for several minutes, unmoving. Separated from her by hundreds of meters and numerous stone walls, Sunny grew tense, ready to step through the shadows and appear in the underground chamber should something reach for the blind girl from the cold darkness.

'What the hell is that place? Did Dusk leave those things behind?'

It would make sense for the sybil who had lived in the temple for centuries to leave many traces here, including her personal records. However, what was with the ominous well leading to the dark waters?

Sunny gritted his teeth.

But in the end, nothing happened. Cassie clenched her fists, turned away from the underground well, and left the chamber the way she came.

Ascending the narrow steps, she reentered the temple proper and traced her way back to her quarters, entering them through a private passage.

It was only then that Sunny allowed his tense body to relax.

His mind, however, was anything but calm.

'Why would Dusk have a secret like that?'

He hesitated for a while, then felt a cold chill run down his spine.

'...Or does it have nothing to do with Dusk, at all?'

Chapter-1540: Clouded Judgment

The feeling of restlessness Sunny had felt after leaving Twilight returned. Something strange was going on with Cassie… had been going on for a long time, maybe. He was almost sure of it.

But it was the "almost" of it all that made the situation so difficult. He did not know what to do… confront her? Share his concern with others?

What would he say?

That Cassie should not have survived Twilight? None of them should have survived there, really. That she kept journals? There was nothing wrong with that, and claiming otherwise would only make him seem strange. That she was too quiet and unassuming, which made him feel as if she was hiding something vital from them? That sounded like paranoia talking.

In fact, it was — it was the Sin of Solace whispering into his ear. The Sin of Solace, whose only purpose was to drive him mad. Was he a fool to listen to these whispers?

Sunny was not even sure himself what he was suspecting Cassie of, just that he did not feel comfortable with her secrets. But…

Was it really because there was something off about the blind girl, or was it simply because he had never trusted her? Was he still secretly holding on to the grudge after what she had done on the Forgotten Shore, which painted his perception of her?

Sunny would be lying if he said that he had let go of that grudge completely.

None of the others seemed to suspect Cassie of anything, so why was he the only one looking for faults in her actions?

'Ah, damnation.'

What was he supposed to do?

Did he even need to do anything?

So what if Cassie had a pile of old journals? So what if she kept secrets?

Was he the right person to blame someone for not being entirely honest?

More than that, he had always known that Cassie kept much of what she knew to herself. In fact, Sunny was the reason why she had closed herself off, to begin with — he was the one who had told her how destructive of a poison her visions were… in the most cruel way he could think of, at that.

Her personality had only begun to change after that bitter conversation they had in the medical complex of the Academy, right after coming back from the Forgotten Shore.

Nephis was aware that Cassie knew much more than she was letting on, too. She had told him so herself, during one of their conversations on the Ivory Island.

So why was Sunny reacting so strongly now?

'Because we are so close to victory.'

Because this Nightmare was so dreadful, and its end was swiftly approaching. Sunny was nervous that something would ruin their chances of returning to the waking world, and the ominous shadow of Torment was the last thing standing between them and salvation.

Torment had never appeared before them, and so, she was as frightening as their imaginations could make her.

Perhaps Cassie was just a substitute for all that fear.

…Or perhaps there was really something ominous going on with the blind seer.

"Oh, she is definitely planning to betray you. Again."

The Sin of Solace smiled, looking at him with dark amusement.

Sunny cursed and threw a wooden tray at the sword wraith. The tray passed through the apparition and fell to the floor, clattering loudly.

The hateful wraith laughed.

"Fool, you are simply incapable of learning, are you? Even after what she did to you, what she took from you, you are still willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. No wonder you ended up being made a slave by her… ah, and she never even apologized. I bet she doesn't feel even a little bit remorseful about her betrayal. Since she doesn't, what is going to stop her from turning on you again?"

Sunny glared at the Sin of Solace, then took a deep breath.

He slowly calmed down.

"That… doesn't even make any sense. At least try to be convincing when you are spouting nonsense, will you?"

Sunny was prejudiced against Cassie… that much was apparent. Deep in his heart, he still harbored resentment toward her. He valued and cared for her, as well, but that was beside the point. Humans were complicated and contradictory creatures, indeed… just like Nephis had said, they could love and hate someone at the same time.

Because Sunny's judgment was clouded, it was easy to find fault with Cassie. But if he flipped his perception and looked at the situation from a different angle, trying to find the opposite, any suspicion that the blind girl could have been doing something to harm the cohort would crumble. It was a preposterous idea.

Almost every action Cassie had taken was for their benefit. They would have never made it that far without her. From start to finish, she had been nothing but a selfless ally, putting herself in harm's way on numerous occasions. Finding the scattered members of the cohort,

escaping Aletheia's Island, surviving the depths of the Great River… none of that would have been possible without her.

So, no matter what secret Cassie was keeping, it was not something that would harm the cohort. Sunny had no reason to worry about that.

After realizing that, he felt his heart calming down.

But then, it suddenly felt heavy once again.

Because while Sunny did not have a reason to worry about the cohort…

There might have been a reason to worry about Cassie.

'She's not… preparing herself for something drastic, is she?'

A deep scowl appeared on his face once again. He remained silent for a while, then shook his head.

'No, she wouldn't. Cassie might seem soft, but she is one of the strongest people I know. She's much stronger than anyone gives her credit for.'

Still, a tiny seed of doubt remained.

Sunny cursed quietly, threw a hateful glance at the Sin of Solace, and turned his attention back to the Transcendent charm.

The day of their departure was swiftly approaching, so he had to perform the alteration as soon as possible.

Chapter-1541: Into the Sunset

On the last night before their departure from Fallen Grace, Sunny let out a deep sigh and listened to the Spell whisper into his ear:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

With that, the Transcendent charm he had been working on had become a Supreme one. Its enchantment, which enhanced the material properties of objects, was further strengthened. Not only was the nexus of its weave more potent now, but the weave itself had also been made more robust to withstand the increased pressure.

Strings of ethereal light were intertwined with the black threads of shadow essence, forming a mesmerizing tapestry.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'Four down… one to go.'

He had saved the hardest Memory for last — the Transcendent memory of the Seventh Tier meant for Nephis. That one, he was going to have to alter on their way to Verge.

Things were happening so fast now. Looking back at what he had experienced in the Nightmare, it was hard to believe how close the end of it all was. It seemed like Sunny had been sharing the ketch with Nephis and Ananke just yesterday, but now, he was approaching the finish line.

Dismissing the charm, he rose and stretched his limbs, then left his quarters. It was night, but no one in Fallen Grace seemed to be asleep. While Sunny was passing by the windows, he saw numerous people crowding the streets on the neighboring island-ships.

They were all looking at the white temple, knowing that their lady, and the Outsider warriors she had gathered, were going to leave come dawn — or rather, dusk.

Leave to challenge the very source of the Defilement.

It was not an exaggeration to say that their fates depended on the result of their journey. However… looking at these people, Sunny did not feel that they were concerned for themselves. It seemed like they were concerned about Dusk and her Outsider companions, instead.

'Funny…'

Sunny could not remember the last time he had watched someone go into battle on his behalf. It must have happened occasionally, but he was usually the one doing the fighting. In Antarctica, he had carried thousands of refugees on his back across the frozen hellscape… which had seemed like a burden, at the time.

But, in a sense, he would have been burdened watching someone fight and die for him more. So, he could easily understand the complicated storm of emotions brewing in the hearts of the people being left behind in Fallen Grace.

He often complained about how harsh and unforgiving the life of an Awakened was… but it was also a privilege.

Consumed by such detached thoughts, he entered the hall where Cassie was giving the last orders to the people who would be ruling the city in her absence. Some of them he knew, like the captain of the soldiers or the carpenter who had been in charge of repairing the Chain Breaker, while others were strangers.

All of them bowed respectfully when he entered.

"Lord Sunless."

He nodded at them and approached Cassie, then placed a hand on her shoulder. A spark of energy traveled between them as the Supreme charm was transferred from his soul to hers.

"Here… all done. The enchantment is substantially more powerful

now. It also consumes much more essence, so be careful."

She summoned the charm, which was shaped like a jade flower, and weighed it on her hand. Soon, the petals of the ornament ignited with a soft glow, hinting that its enchantment was activated. At the same time, the hilt of the Quiet Dancer glistened.

A faint smile appeared on Cassie's lips.

"Thank you."

Sunny nodded, then hesitated for a few moments. There were too many people around them, so he couldn't be too free in what he said. Still… he didn't want to remain entirely silent.

Eventually, he removed his hand from her shoulder and asked, his voice serious:

"Listen. Are you… alright?"

Cassie raised an eyebrow, seemingly confused.

"Sure? Why wouldn't I be? I'm better than ever."

There was a rare hint of sincere relief and anticipation in her voice.

Sunny frowned, lingered for a moment, then nodded again and turned to leave.

In truth, he had wanted to use this opportunity to retrieve the shadow that followed Cassie around. But hearing that answer, he changed his mind.

'Keep her company for a little while longer.'

Who in their right mind would be relived in such a situation?

Leaving the shadow behind, he left the hall and went to find the other members of the cohort.

The night ended quickly, and the seven suns rose from the waters of the Great River once more. Fallen Grace was once again painted by

the vivid radiance of the blazing sunset, drowning in its crimson splendor.

The soldiers, all wearing their white armor, had formed a corridor on the streets of the floating city. Their gazes were solemn as they watched the seven Outsiders leave the temple and walk toward the piers. Separated by that living wall, the crowd of citizens was watching them, too.

This time, there were no cheers. Instead, everyone was silent, which felt a little eerie.

Feeling the weight of countless gazes, Sunny was reminded of the docks of Falcon Scott on the last day of evacuation, for some reason. Back then, people had been desperately trying to get on the last leaving ship, knowing that everyone who stayed behind would die.

Today, the situation was exactly opposite. The people staying behind were going to be safe. The ones who were sailing away would be risking their lives. However… the atmosphere was strangely similar.

Desperate desire that could not be expressed with words. Fear, longing, and shame. Sorrow, grief, and pain.

And hope.

Hope was such a powerful and resilient thing. Unreasonable, even. It could bloom even in the most terrible of situations, bringing with it strength to go on.

Sunny knew hope better than most. And hopelessness, too.

They reached the pier and boarded the Chain Breaker. Turning back, Sunny looked at the crowd one last time. Most of these youths looked unfamiliar — even if he knew them from before, their appearance had changed now.

He did, however, notice Cronos standing in one of the first rows, accompanied by a pretty young woman. Noticing him looking, the teenager smiled and waved.

'This guy…'

Sunny smiled and waved, as well. He even winked, making the brat look startled.

'This is what we're fighting for, I guess. In a way.'

There was a little empty space in front of the gangway leading to the ship. Cassie's two deaf guards were standing there, looking up at her with lost gazes.

She turned around and faced the crowd.

This time, however, there was no speech. The blind girl remained silent for a few moments, then addressed her guards instead.

"...Thank you. You two are free, now."

They were looking at her, unable to hear those words. She smiled softly.

"Thank you for everything. Take care of yourselves. And of each other."

The two Ascended seemed to sway slightly, then knelt silently. The woman let go of the hilt of her sword. The man dropped his silk cord into the water.

Tears were streaming down their weathered faces.

Cassie sighed lightly, bowed deeply to the crowd, and turned away.

"Let's go. It's time for us to leave."

Soon, the Chain Breaker departed from the pier and rose into the sky.

They were flying into the blazing sunset, disappearing into its bloodred glow.

Forever.

Chapter-1542: Last Journey

And there it was.

They had left on the last journey of this tumultuous, dreadful Nightmare.

For Sunny and Nephis, it was especially poignant, because they had come from the far reaches of the future — and were now on their way to the furthest reaches of the past, where Verge stood.

It must have been especially emotional for Cassie, as well, because she was leaving the city she had spent a whole year ruling and trying to preserve. Now, its fate depended on whether they would be successful in their battle against the First Seeker.

In any case, she would never see Fallen Grace again.

None of them knew if it would even exist, in any kind of way, should they prevail. However, it was inevitable for Fallen Grace to be destroyed should they fail.

The blind girl did not look back. Instead, she stood at the bow of the flying ship, facing the setting suns. The others gave her some space, knowing that there had to be a storm of complicated emotions weighing on her heart.

Only Sunny could see her face, visible to the shadow that was hiding close by.

Cassie's face was not wistful or sad. Instead, it was full of resolve and determination… impatience, even. It was as though she had been waiting for this moment for a long, long time.

Which was true, of course. Apart from Mordret, she had spent by far the longest in this Nightmare. Sunny knew that he was sick and tired

of the Tomb of Ariel. The blind girl had to be feeling the same, but much more intensely.

'We've been here for so long.'

Sunny had come to Ariel's Tomb far away from here.

He had spent time with Nephis, come to care for and then lost Ananke, traveled to Fallen Grace and got to know the culture of the River People there, fought against all kinds of underwater horrors on the way to Aletheia's Island, withstood the insidious hell of the time loop, dove into the depths of the Great River and emerged from the other side, battled against the Defiled Saints in Twilight…

It was hard to believe, but he had spent more time in the Tomb of Ariel than in Antarctica, not to mention the Kingdom of Hope.

Cassie, though… she had been here longer than even on the Forgotten Shore.

And that was without even counting the unknown number of cycles the seven of them had lived through before arriving at this one… hopefully, the last.

The Chain Breaker soared above the waves, flying toward the Edge.

Sunny spent some time enjoying the view of the blazing river, then rubbed his face and retreated to his cabin. There, he concentrated on preparing for the alteration of Neph's silver blade.

Now that they were en route to Verge, he felt a sense of urgency and wanted to finish with it as soon as possible.

A day passed in meticulous work, then another.

On the third day, they reached the duskward edge of the Great River.

It was much like the dawnward edge, but also different. The enormous, inconceivable waterfall was the same. The powerful current that threatened to destroy anything plunged into its crushing embrace was the same. The dark void beyond the Edge was the same, as well.

But the light here was entirely different from the soft lilac glow of dawn. Instead of the tender radiance, the water here was burning with an intense crimson glow, almost like it was on fire. The inconceivable waterfall that stretched in both directions as far as the eye could see was painted vibrant red, as well.

It was almost as if a sea of blood was spilling into a boundless, dark abyss.

Enthralled by that dreadful sight, the members of the cohort gathered on the deck. The distant whispers of the falling water had grown into a deafening roar, making it hard to speak.

So, they remained silent.

The Chain Breaker crested the breaking point of the waterfall and flew into the abyssal darkness, leaving the Great River behind.

Soon, the roar of the Edge grew quieter, and then disappeared in the howling of the wind. They had returned to the dark abyss of the interior of Ariel's Tomb.

This time, however, their journey was going to be different from the previous time they had visited the boundless darkness. That was because, unlike the first time, the Chain Breaker would be crossing the space within the loop of the Great River, as opposed to the empty space between it and the walls of the pyramid.

None of them knew what exactly would be waiting for them there, but at least there was no threat of the terrifying swarm of the Dark Butterflies becoming aware of their presence — since they would not be coming anywhere near the walls of the pyramid, where the Great Monsters slumbered.

They also did not know how long the journey across the empty space in the middle of the looping river would take. The last time, they had arrived back to the surface of the Great River rather quickly — but that was because space itself behaved strangely inside the pyramid.

Still, it was going to be much faster than simply sailing all the way to the dawn of time. They were going to reach the waters surrounding

Verge in a week, two at most.

If nothing unforeseen happened.

Sunny studied the darkness for some time, feeling both wary of the challenge ahead and ready to face it.

Then, he gritted his teeth and went back to working on the silver blade. The mind-numbing complexity of weaving calmed him down, eradicating all unnecessary thoughts.

'Soon… this Nightmare will be over soon.'

Sunny refused to think that they would fail.

However…

Now that they were nearing the end of this dreadful tale, the thoughts that he had banished a long time ago were returning.

The thoughts about the fate of Antarctica, of the refugees he had so desperately tried to protect. What was happening to the waking world right now? How was Rain doing? Was she healthy and safe, or infected by the Nightmare Spell and in the throes of going through her own trials?

Knowing that he could not allow himself to get distracted at this critical point, he suppressed these thoughts again.

He was going to find out sooner than later, anyway.

If he survived.

So, what Sunny had to do right now was make sure that he survived, and that his friends survived, as well.

He had to fulfill the promise he had given, and conquer this Nightmare. At all costs.

Chapter-1543: Pride of a Craftsman

Just as it was in the black void beyond the Great River, the space itself acted strangely in the empty space contained at the center of endless loop of flowing water. The Chain Breaker had been traversing the vast emptiness for a while now — at least a day or two, from how it felt — but Sunny was not at all sure how far they had traveled.

All he knew was that the point of the Great River from which they had left seemed far away now, while the point which they hoped to reach was not as distant. It shimmered in the darkness, both alluring and terrifying.

Navigating the flying ship toward Verge was not very hard, because it was situated near the Source. So, all they had to do was aim for the last stretch of clear water before the area of the Great River shrouded in hazy mist.

A long time ago, close to the start of the Nightmare, Sunny had an epiphany that the strength of his allies was his own power, as well. Therefore, he had become determined to increase the strength of the cohort as much as he could, in any way he could.

He had been faithful to that determination up until now. Apart from the very action of gathering every member of the cohort from across the Tomb of Ariel, that had mostly taken the form of arming them with powerful Memories. Sunny had spent much of his time developing and improving his skill as a sorcerer for that purpose.

Now, his ability to weave had improved tremendously compared to the start of the Nightmare. Studying Ananke's Mantle had allowed him to make a qualitative leap in understanding of the fundamental principles of weaving, and by studying many Memories in order to

alter them, Sunny had improved his overall ability, as well.

As a result, Neph's Crown of Dawn had become a Supreme Memory. That was still his most valuable achievement, because that single Memory was able to empower all the rest of the Memories at their disposal. Of course, Sunny had not stopped there.

He had also provided his allies with four additional altered Memories — Kai, Effie, and Cassie now wielded them, preparing to use his gifts in the battle against Torment, the First Seeker, and the remnant forces of the Defilement.

His help was not limited to Memories, either. Whether on purpose or not, Sunny had also helped his friends grow stronger as individual warriors. Jet had received her Aspect Legacy and was now wielding the chilling mist blade. Kai had acquired the [Dragonslayer] Attribute, which enhanced his body and elemental resistance.

Nephis seemed to have regained her lost confidence. Her understanding of her Divine Aspect had deepened, and with it came the Knowledge of Fire — one of the boons of her mysterious Aspect Legacy.

She was also a Titan now.

…Sunny had grown vastly stronger than he used to be, as well. Not even mentioning his sorcery, here in the Tomb of Ariel, he had mastered the fourth step of Shadow Dance and perfected the Shadow Shell technique. He had become a Terror. Two of his Shadows had evolved, growing much more powerful.

A version of him from before Antarctica would have been like a child in front of him at the end of the harrowing Southern Campaign. But that version of him, in turn, would stand no chance against his current self.

And somewhere between the two, there was a version of himself that Sunny never wanted to meet, let alone fight. The Mad Prince, which had come and gone, changing everything.

'Are we ready?'

Still, despite all that growth and power, Sunny could not allow himself to stop until the Nightmare was conquered, and the Spell called for him to wake up. So, he threw himself into weaving, trying to finish the last alteration while the Chain Breaker was still traversing the black void.

The process… was not going splendidly.

The silver blade he was trying to alter was a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier, and possessed many enchantments. Its weave was inconceivably vast and intricate, and although he was not trying to change it entirely, he still needed to study every part of it in great detail.

If anything, trying to isolate and transplant a single nexus was proving to be much harder than simply altering the entirety of a spellweave. The elaborate tapestry of essence strings was deeply interconnected — no single thread existed in isolation, instead crossing and touching numerous other threads.

Much like fate. The string of a person's fate did not exist in isolation, either — it touched the fates of countless other people, stretching from the past into the future, and thus influenced, and was influenced by, the greater flow of fate.

But Sunny was nothing if not resourceful. Weaving strings of fate was beyond what mortals like him could achieve, but he could manipulate strings of soul essence with great finesse. Therefore, he could alter the weave of the silver blade to make sure that the nexus he was transplanting only burdened the pattern of a single enchantment, without breaking the balance of all the rest.

He had to add new patterns in some places, and cut the others down to match. Those that were cut had to be restored, of course, albeit taking a different shape. Slowly but surely, countless lightless threads of shadow essence became intertwined with the radiant strings of ethereal light.

He had forgotten about all else, pulling on everything he had learned about weaving to accomplish his task.

From his first tentative attempts at creating sorcery, back in the bloody menagerie of monsters under the arena of the Red Colosseum, to creating Memories for the Brilliant Emporium, to improving the soul arsenals of his soldiers in Antarctica and creating the Siege Souvenir to slay Goliath, to learning from Ananke's Mantle and altering the Crown of Dawn…

All the lessons he had learned were put to use, allowing him to create a lethal sword for Nephis. He knew that she would achieve incredible things by wielding this weapon…

And if he managed to accomplish his ambitious alteration, every achievement she made with the silver sword would, in small part, also be his.

Sunny, who had always been a fighter, was feeling a strange exhilaration as he worked on the complicated Memory. It was the unfamiliar, but rewarding pride of a craftsman who was confident in the usefulness of his work.

And then, finally, everything was ready.

Summoning two pairs of shadow hands, Sunny took a deep breath, picked up Weaver's Needle, and got to work.

Time seemed to slow down as his six hands moved through the vast tapestry of glowing strings, snapping some and weaving new ones into the intricate pattern. Drops of sweat fell from his brow, but he did not pay it any attention. His expression remained calm and composed, utter focus permeating his gaze.

Golden sparks ignited in the depths of his altered eyes, and his fingertips felt the slightest vibration spreading through the essence strings. From time to time, his skin was cut, but no blood seeped out of the cuts. He did not allow the pain to distract him, either.

'Wondrous…'

Sunny felt exhilarated as he weaved sorcery.

And then, he felt overjoyed.

Lowering his hands, Sunny let out a long sigh and listened to the Spell announcing the destruction of a Memory, and the creation of a new one.

He had succeeded.

And now that he did, there were no more preparations to be made.

All that remained was to reach Verge and use everything little bit of strength he had accumulated to destroy the First Seeker, and escape this dreadful Nightmare.

Chapter-1544: Innermost Void

After returning the silver blade to Nephis, and failing to say anything meaningful to her, Sunny did not have much to do. He spent some time with Kai, Effie, and Jet, enjoyed a good night of sleep, and then assumed his usual spot under the branches of the sacred tree to meditate.

Everything that could have been done was already done. They had prepared as best they could… at least he thought they did. Now, all that remained was to clear his mind and prepare himself mentally for the coming battle.

Sunny and his companions spent the rest of the time the Chain Breaker was traversing the empty void clearing their minds and steeling their hearts. The battle they faced promised to be a dire one…

But, honestly, Sunny did not find it hard to calm his mind and get ready to face whatever it was that would come.

There were only so many times he could feel nervous to the point of losing sleep before a decisive battle. He had experienced so many bloody clashes in Antarctica that anticipating another one had long become an ordinary event. Preparing for one mentally was not only a skill, but also a habit.

So, Sunny found himself feeling strangely calm. He slowly went over his experiences in the Tomb of Ariel, consolidating his insights and shoring up his fundamentals. Rapid growth was most welcome, but failing to digest his many gains properly could leave him unstable.

He had to eliminate all instability before reaching Verge.

Others were doing the same, each in their own fashion. While Sunny meditated under the sacred tree, Nephis practiced with her new

sword, getting used to its weight and powers.

Jet had found a hammock, somewhere, and was comfortably asleep in it. Effie was enjoying the snacks she had prepared for herself. Kai was practicing a strange, outwardly inefficient form of archery while absentmindedly humming a song. Cassie was steering the ship, which seemed to calm her down.

Mordret, morbidly enough, was inspecting his collection of bodies. Those of them that had belonged to Awakened each possessed their own unique powers, so he was probably coming up with plans of when and where to use them best.

'That guy… is such a creep.'

Sunny shook his head, and then went to inspect his Shadows... which were created from the dead creatures he had killed. Not creepy at all, surely.

Everything seemed to be in order. Everyone was ready.

…But before they could return to the Great River, an unexpected event threw a wrench into their plans.

Sunny was on his way to the bow when a loud boom resounded from below the deck, and the entire ship suddenly shook. Gritting his teeth, he immediately stepped through the shadows and appeared at the galley, which seemed to have been the place where the booming sound originated.

He had expected to see some harrowing Nightmare Creature that had come from the void and infiltrated the Chain Breaker, or perhaps Mordret trying to kill one of the members of the cohort… but nothing like that was happening.

Instead, he only saw Effie standing near the bulkhead, hissing curses. Her fist had crashed through the durable wood, splintering and cracking it. Her other hand was resting on her belly.

Her face was pale, and twisted by a grimace of pain.

Before Sunny could understand what was happening, Kai and Jet

appeared at the doors. Cassie was not far behind them.

Mordret had not deemed it necessary to show up, but was definitely watching through the reflections. Nephis, meanwhile, remained on the stern, controlling the ship.

'What happened?'

Effie lingered for a few moments, then turned to them and forced out a smile. The sight of it was familiar, but Sunny was unnerved by the dark, bitter look in her eyes.

The huntress took a deep breath and said, her voice somewhat strained:

"Ah… I think… that was a contraction."

Sunny remained motionless for a moment, trying to comprehend the meaning of what Effie had said. Then, his face fell.

They had left Fallen Grace so swiftly precisely because they hoped to end the Nightmare before Effie was due. No one knew what would happen to her baby if it was born here… would it be Riverborn, or an Outsider? Would it become infected by the Nightmare Spell the moment it was born? Would it survive the return to the waking world?

Because they did not know, they could not risk it. They had to escape the Tomb of Ariel as soon as possible, and it had seemed like there was enough time.

But fate had different plans. Even though Effie had not been pregnant for nine months yet, the labor had started prematurely.

Seen from a different perspective, though, she had been carrying her child for close to two years now. So, if anything, its birth was long overdue.

Effie studied their frozen faces, and then looked down with a sigh.

"...Sorry, everyone."

Sunny frowned.

A moment later, he said in a stern voice:

"What are you sorry for? Give that nonsense up right now. Also… please don't break the ship any more. We need to traverse this bottomless abyss, so, you know, it would be really inconvenient if it fell apart around us."

He glanced at the other members of the cohort. Jet and Kai looked extremely worried, while Cassie maintained a calm expression.

'First, I need to get Nephis here.'

Effie was a Master, and her pregnancy was nothing if not irregular. Sunny had very little idea about how to deliver a baby, but he knew that having a powerful healer at hand would be extremely helpful.

Nephis could recover from having her neck broken and most of her body vaporized. Certainly, making sure that both Effie and the baby survived the delivery would not be a problem.

Banishing unnecessary thoughts from his mind, he shifted into problem-solving mode and pulled Kai away.

"Let's go… give the ladies some privacy."

Then, glancing at Cassie, he said:

"I'll send Nephis down. You… probably know what to do better than I do."

Receiving a nod from the blind girl, he led Kai away.

Ascending to the upper deck, Sunny walked over to the stern of the ship and stopped near Nephis, who looked at him with a silent question.

He lingered for a moment.

"...Effie seemed to be going into labor. Go, they're waiting. I'll steer the ship."

A frown appeared on Neph's face, and she left the runic circle without saying a word. Soon, Sunny and Kai were left alone.

But not for long.

Mordret had appeared from somewhere, sparing them a curious glance.

"I couldn't help but overhear. It seems that a wolf cub is about to be born, huh? How exciting. Can't say I ever heard about a child being born in a Nightmare… that should be a first, even among the Great Clans…"

Before he was done talking, Kai suddenly turned and raised a hand. It seemed as if he had wanted to grab Mordret by the collar, but managed to control himself, and simply put a hand on his shoulder instead.

Kai's usually gentle eyes were shining with a cold and furious kind of light.

"...You stay away from that child, Prince Mordret. I'm warning you."

His clear voice did not contain the authority of his Ascended Ability, but it still crashed into the Prince of Nothing like a wave. Mordret stared at the charming… usually charming archer for a few moments, amusement slowly disappearing from his gaze.

Then, he scoffed.

"Who do you take me for? A monster?"

He shook his head.

"Well, alright, I might be a bit of a monster. But I'm not a fool. What do I gain from taking the body of an infant? Relax, Ascended Nightingale. We are all in the same boat. Quite literally."

Kai glared at him for a few moments more, then slowly removed his hand and took a step back, leaning on the railings. His expression was suddenly somber and pained.

He remained silent for a while, then said in a lost voice:

"How… did this happen?"

Sunny knew how he felt, because he felt the same.

Nevertheless, he suddenly had a ridiculous impulse to start explaining the birds and the bees to his friend, just like Effie had done to him so many times.

Steering the Chain Breaker through the dark void, Sunny chuckled all of a sudden.

"It just did. Don't worry… with Nephis there, it's all going to be alright."

However, he knew that the delivery itself was not what Kai was worried about.

It was everything else.

Shaking his head, Mordret walked to the edge of the deck and looked into the dark emptiness beyond.

Somewhere fat away, the Great River flowed, a long span of it shrouded in mist. Outside the mist of the Source, Verge was waiting for them.

He smiled.

"What an exciting Nightmare it is. Is it not?"

Chapter-1545: Purest Sound

The delivery did not go smoothly. Sunny, Kai… and Mordret, of all people… remained on the stern of the ship for more or less the entire time, waiting for the results. Sunny at least had a task to keep him occupied — guiding the Chain Breaker across the black void was not very difficult, but it still required attention.

Mordret did not seem to care that much, but Kai was extremely concerned. He paced nervously, sometimes glancing down, but then hurriedly turning his gaze away.

It was a bit strange. All three of them could learn exactly what was going on — Sunny thanks to his shadows, Mordret through the reflections, and Kai due to his Awakened Ability. However, none of them made use of that opportunity, preferring to remain in the dark about what was happening below deck.

It was not like they did not receive any signs, though.

The Chain Breaker seemed to tremble from time to time, and Effie's voice eventually reached their ears, penetrating the impregnable wood the enchanted ship was built from.

Hearing the barrage of curses pouring out of her mouth, Sunny was a bit reassured. Things could not be going too terrible, considering that she had enough energy for such eloquence.

…At the same time, he felt his ears slowly turning numb. Some of those words, he did not even know. Others seemed familiar, but used in an entirely new context. Even after growing up in the outskirts, he was on the verge of blushing a little.

'Really… is there a need to be so descriptive? She has been chewed on by all kinds of Nightmare Creatures. How bad can the pain be?'

Nevertheless, the process continued for many hours. After a while, Effie's voice grew tired, and his expression grew dim.

It was taking too long.

Even without being able to precisely measure time, Sunny knew that Effie had been in labor for longer than usual. It has already been a full day, at least, and there seemed to be no end to it.

Nephis, Cassie, and Jet were with her, handling the process. They would have called upon him and Kai if they needed help, but none of them had appeared from below the deck. Sunny was growing more and more uneasy, and Kai was entirely beyond himself, by then.

"Should we… do something?"

Sunny looked at him somberly.

"Do what? There's nothing to do. Calm down. Neph is there, so everything will work out."

Kai hesitated for a while, then nodded.

It was hard not to feel useless.

It was even harder not to feel burdened by the uncertainty of the future. They were going into battle very soon… the timing of it all was extremely unfortunate. Disastrous, maybe.

This whole Nightmare had been one disaster after another, starting with the dire necessity that had forced them to enter the Seed, to begin with.

And the man responsible for landing them into this situation was right here with them, yawning as he looked into the darkness.

Sunny suppressed the desire to toss Mordret overboard. Not because doing so would lessen their chances of prevailing in Verge, even, but simply because he knew that getting rid of the bastard would not be that easy.

Letting out a heavy sigh, he moved the steering oars slightly and

looked ahead.

Time slowly passed. The intensity of Effie's labor only grew, while at the same time, her voice became more and more fatigued.

And then, after something that felt like several days passed…

They finally heard a new sound.

The shrill, loud sound of a baby crying.

Kai let out a long sigh and simply sat down where he stood, looking completely exhausted. It was as if it was him who had given birth to a child, not Effie.

But Sunny knew how he felt.

It was indescribably strange, to hear a child's cry in the black emptiness of the Tomb of Ariel. A pure sound like that did not belong in this dreadful place… it seemed wrong and alien.

And at the same time, strangely uplifting.

Feeling a profound sense of relief, Sunny poured his essence into the runic circle and slowly brought the Chain Breaker to a halt.

The flying ship hovered in the dark abyss, unmoving, the leaves of the sacred tree emanating a beautiful glow.

Sunny remained motionless himself, for a while, then took a deep breath and left the runic circle.

Glancing at Kai, who seemed too mentally exhausted to think straight, he shook his head and said:

"I'll go check."

He walked across the deck of the Chain Breaker and descended below deck, eventually finding his way to one of the cabins. In front of it, the air was heavy with the scent of blood. A radiant memory illuminated the gloomy interior of the corridor, and Cassie was standing in front of the door, her face tired.

Hearing his steps, she turned her head slightly.

Sunny stopped, feeling his heart beating rapidly.

"How… how is she doing?"

A faint smile slowly found its way onto the blind girl's face, illuminating it beautifully.

"It wasn't easy… but she's fine. They're both fine. Nephis helped."

He hesitated.

"...What about the timing? Wasn't it too early?"

Cassie remained silent for a moment, then shrugged with uncertainty.

"Everything seems fine."

Then, she suddenly remembered something and raised a hand.

"Oh. Can you… lend me the Endless Spring? I was supposed to bring more water, but the nearest barrel is all the way in the cargo hold. We'll wash them off. And then you'll be able to see them."

Sunny summoned the Memory and placed it in Cassie's hand, feeling a storm of emotions raging in his wildly beating heart.

'What the hell. What is this damned Nightmare, even?'

"Right. Sure. Of course. I'll… I'll go tell Kai."

He turned to walk away, then froze.

"Oh! I forgot to ask. Who is it? A boy, or a girl?"

Cassie smiled wider and then opened the door of the cabin, slipping inside.

"It's a healthy boy!"

Chapter-1546: Raised by Wolves

Although Effie had gone into labor prematurely, both she and her infant son were alright.

The worst fear of the cohort had not come true, either. Perhaps because the child had been conceived in the waking world, or perhaps because he was born in the black void outside the currents of the Great River, at the very heart of Ariel's Tomb, he was not Riverborn.

At least that was what they surmised after cautiously setting the Chain Breaker in motion and observing no change in the appearance of the baby.

It was an immense relief.

Even Sunny, who always expected the worst and was usually prepared to receive painful blows from fortune, felt like an incredible burden had been lifted from his heart.

The immediate danger had passed. Of course, the future was still uncertain. They still had to fight Torment and destroy the First Seeker. The child's life still hung in a fragile balance, because it was unknown what would happen to his soul after the end of the Nightmare.

But, somehow, Sunny felt hopeful.

After everything had been said and done, the Chain Breaker continued sailing through the dark abyss. The members of the cohort took turns spending time with Effie and her newborn, full of contradictory emotions.

The huntress herself had been exhausted by the prolonged labor, but was regaining her vigor and vitality at an incredible rate.

She still looked tired and drained, though, when Sunny came to see her.

Effie was in her cabin, sitting in a comfortable chair. She was wrapped in a blanket, and holding a sizable bundle in her arms, looking at it tenderly. Sunny was actually startled by that gaze, unaccustomed to seeing his friend so… openly vulnerable.

And strangely content.

Hearing him enter, Effie looked up and smiled tiredly.

"Ah… Uncle Doofus. Welcome, welcome."

He approached and looked at the bundle, finally laying his eyes on the newborn.

Effie's child… looked pretty much like all infants did, with the exception of the fact that he was entirely too large to have been born mere hours ago, at least twice the size of a normal baby.

'That poor woman…'

Sunny looked at the huntress with pity. Effie had always been unreasonably tall, and her son would grow up to be a real giant, from the looks of it.

Internally, Sunny sighed.

'Another beanpole. Gods. That brat is going to be taller than me in no time, won't he? Well... he might just grow up to be taller than anyone. That's a relief.'

Effie's smile grew wider.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?"

Sunny stared at her in confusion.

She… had really chosen the wrong person to ask that question.

"What are you talking about? He's absolutely ugly. All infants are.

And don't give me that look… you know I can't lie!"

The huntress stared at him for a couple moments, then laughed and gently stroked the sleeping infant's soft head.

"Well, I think he's beautiful. Almost as much as his mom is, eh?"

Sunny shook his head, wondering if all parents were a little sick in the head. Well, they had to be. Otherwise, what would make them care for the poor infants? A bit of unreasonable affection went a long way...

He hesitated for a while, thinking about the little life in front of him. The infant… actually, it was not very convenient to keep calling him the infant. Glancing at Effie, he asked:

"What are you going to name him?"

She remained silent for a bit, smiling. Letting out a quiet sigh, Effie shrugged.

"I can't just go and name him right away. I need to consult his dad first."

There was a moment of somber silence, with both of them refusing to mention the fact that the baby's father was most likely long dead.

Effie looked back at her son and smiled again.

"Ah! But… look at him. He looks like a little dumpling, doesn't he?"

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

'I knew it!'

He shook his head energetically.

"No… bad Effie, bad! You can't name your son Dumpling! That's a very bad idea!

She giggled.

"He-he. Well… I'll just call him Little Dumpling for now. We'll come

up with a proper name after getting out of the Nightmare."

Sunny just stared at her for a while, then shook his head again, this time slowly.

"Whatever… do what you want. Don't come complaining to me later, though."

Effie gave him a mischievous look.

"Sunny… you, of all people, should know better. I mean, did you mom not name you Sunless? And look at you! You turned out… well…"

Her voice gradually turned doubtful. Then, she grinned.

"Actually, never mind. I think you might be right."

Hearing her laugh, he hesitated for a moment, then asked tentatively:

"How are you feeling?"

Effie looked at her son again, her smile turning slightly solemn. Eventually, she shrugged:

"Like I've been run over by a pack of Nightmare Creatures. But don't worry. Nephis healed me up pretty well. I'll be good as new, soon."

She caressed the infant's soft cheek and added, her voice hiding a somber undertone:

"Maybe… maybe it's for the best. At least this way, I'll be able to participate in the final battle. I've been drowning in self-loathing because of being so useless, you know. Now… either we survive Verge, or not. In any case, we'll be together until the very end."

Sunny frowned, studying her face. Her eyes were sunken, and her gaze was dark… but, at the same time, fierce. It would be of great help to have the fearsome Raised by Wolves fight side by side with them, of course.

But…

"Are you sure? What about your son?"

Effie hesitated for a moment.

"...If we fail, he will die. So, I'll hide him in the Black Beast Locket. And do everything I can to make sure that we both get to live."

She remained silent for a while, looking at the sleeping baby.

Then, Effie turned to Sunny and suddenly looked him in the eyes.

"You know, Sunny… I once told you that the world we live in is dying. And I still believe that — no, I believe it even more, after experiencing the last few years."

A light smile slowly appeared on her face, and something fearsome suddenly ignited deep in her sunken, tired eyes.

"But, you know… now, I find myself in the mood to go and turn the entire world upside-down. Maybe even tear it down completely and rebuild it from scratch, if need be."

She took a measured breath.

"Just to make sure that there's enough space in that world for this little guy to live a life that is worth living."

Effie looked at Sunny for a few moments, and then laughed.

"Someone has to, after all. And if we won't… then who the hell will?"

Chapter-1547: Dawn of Time

The next day, Effie appeared on the deck of the Chain Breaker, carrying her baby. She was still recovering, and in truth, it would have been better if she stayed in bed for a few more days… but time waited for no one.

Luckily, Effie was an Ascended, and possessed a body that was much more robust than that of a mundane woman — or pretty much any other Master, really. So, even though she looked tired and drained, her vitality was returning at a frightening pace.

Perhaps she would indeed be ready to fight by the time they reached Verge.

The Chain Breaker was traversing the abyssal void, with the radiant ribbon of the Great River surrounding it like a twisting ring. The seven suns revolved around it, making the inconceivable flowing realm shine. There were no stars in the impenetrable darkness of the false sky, but the light of the river was enough to illuminate the vast expanse of silent darkness.

Holding the baby, who had just woken up, Effie smiled.

"Look! That is pretty impressive, right? Nothing like a boring medical ward in NQSC. Leave it to a child of mine to arrive with such style…"

Frightened by the howling of the wind and the coldness of the void, the baby opened its mouth and let out a shrill cry. Soon, the sound of his voice drowned out the wind. At the same time, the leaves of the sacred tree rustled a little louder, as if concerned for the tiny human.

Sunny stared at them for a while, then shook his head.

'That kid… is bound to have a very unique life, I guess.'

Sunny's own birth was rather unusual, considering that it had happened during a solar eclipse and on a winter solstice. But being born in a Nightmare taking place inside a pyramid built by a daemon from the corpse of an Unholy Titan? That took the cake.

Of course, the seven of them had to conquer the Nightmare first, for Effie's child to have any kind of life.

Letting out a sigh, Sunny went to keep Effie company.

They traveled closer and closer to their destination.

In the next few days, nothing much happened. Everyone was alert, afraid that the black void would be hiding horrors of its own, but it was truly and utterly empty. The members of the cohort spend time training, meditating, and hanging out with the baby.

Sunny himself did not particularly see the charm. For now, the infant was indeed no different from a dumpling… all he could do was sleep, cry, and suckle on Effie's breast. There was little sign of intelligence in his eyes, and he did not really emote or react to anything.

In short, the baby was ugly and boring.

But… being with her son seemed to make Effie very happy, so Sunny could not hold it against him. Everyone had their faults, after all. Plus, while the infant himself was a bit of a letdown, watching how everyone reacted to him was rather fun.

Kai seemed to be absolutely smitten. Cassie allowed herself to show her soft side, which had been hidden behind the mask of composure for so long that few people remembered what it looked like. Jet seemed to be in the same boat as Sunny, but she was also a bit intrigued by the tiny human.

Perhaps she was holding herself back, though.

Even Nephis showed some reactions, acting perplexed, bewildered, and slightly mortified when Effie forced her to hold the infant. Which was a very rare sight, and therefore precious.

…Mordret was not allowed anywhere near the baby, which seemed

to suit him fine. He did, however, seem a bit fascinated by the whole thing. Motherly love must have felt alien to him, who had spent most of his childhood being raised by a sinister Sovereign.

Sadly, they did not have a lot of time to pay attention to the newborn. The battle for Verge was approaching, and so, everyone was concentrating on that dire ordeal.

About a week after Effie had given birth, the Chain Breaker returned to the Great River. This time, they did not pass above one of the Edges, landing directly in the middle of the vast flowing expanse, under the azure sky.

The sky was the same, the seven suns were the same, and the currents were the same.

However, here at the dawn of time, the air itself somehow felt different.

If the span of the Great River where Sunny had first found himself corresponded to the present day — the Age of the Nightmare Spell — then these distant waters, situated very close to the misty Source, corresponded to the earliest days of creation… the Age of Gods, when the six deities battled against the remnant abyssal beings across the newly born world, aided by the living creatures they had created, as well as the daemons.

It was hard not to feel a bit of awe at simply being near such mythical times.

It was also hard not to feel pressured.

Not only because Verge was near, but also because this region of the Great River was especially treacherous. There was only one place more dangerous in the Tomb of Ariel — the place far upstream that corresponded to the world-ending Doom War, and was the source of the time storms.

The battles between the gods and the daemons had been furious and harrowing enough that the Great River was forever twisted by their echoes. But the battles between the gods and the abyssal beings that

had escaped the sealing of the Void must have been just as dreadful.

Therefore, any traveler had to be extremely careful while traversing the waters near the Source.

And there was the risk of running into the Defiled abominations, too.

Soon after landing, the members of the cohort gathered at the bow of the Chain Breaker, looking at the distant horizon. Their faces were solemn.

They had made sure to land close to Verge, but did not dare to approach it yet. Nobody knew what was the state of the Defiled city, how many abominations populated it, and what Torment had in store for the potential invaders. Therefore, they had to proceed with caution and gather as much information as they could — if they could — before coming up with an actual plan of attack.

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, and then said, her voice even:

"...This is it."

Chapter-1548: Final Act

She studied the waters and put her hand on the hilt of her sword.

The enchanted scabbard was the same, but the blade it sheathed was different. The longsword bestowed upon her by the great clan Valor had been destroyed in Twilight, and replaced by the silver blade, which was currently molded to a similar shape.

That weapon was a reward Nephis received for slaying Soul Stealer — a Defiled Saint who had once been a prince of the same clan. Whether there was some symbolism to one replacing the other, Sunny did not know.

Nephis turned slightly, looking at Cassie, and asked:

"How long before we reach Verge?"

The blind girl was the best at steering the Chain Breaker, the most familiar with the slate map created by the sybils, and the one who had spent the most time among the River People. So, she was their navigator.

Cassie lingered for a moment.

"No more than two days, if we sail at moderate speed. More if we want to be truly careful… less if we want to abandon caution."

Noting the answer, Nephis glanced at Mordret:

"Is there danger close to us?"

The Prince of Nothing had been a bit cagey about the particulars of how his Aspect worked, but by now, they knew many things about it.

For example, the distance at which Sunny could control his shadows as an Ascended Terror was somewhere around twenty-four

kilometers. His perception was limited to what the shadows perceived, though. Mordret's Dormant Ability, on the contrary, allowed him to perceive the world through any reflection within a similar range — adjusted for the fact that he was merely a Beast at the moment.

It also allowed him to travel physically between these reflections.

Considering that the entire Great River was one giant reflective surface, the Prince of Nothing was nearly omniscient in a considerable area around him.

His Awakened Ability, meanwhile, was what made him so terrifying — the Ability to enter a being's soul through their eyes and possess their body, wearing it as a costume. That Ability, too, would make him a priceless ally during the approaching battle.

Mordret remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head.

"I don't see anything moving. The current itself is a bit strange, though. It's… eerie. We'll see it soon, an area where the water is a little bit darker than usual. I would suggest avoiding that area completely, as well as any other place similar to it."

Nephis looked ahead, then nodded.

"We will proceed at a moderate pace, then, for one day. Then, we will anchor the Chain Breaker and scout the approach to Verge before moving closer."

She hesitated, and then added in a steady tone:

"Be alert. These waters have to be brimming with the Defiled… if we meet one, we can't let it escape alive and alert the others. We can't allow anything to see us before we see it, either. You all know what to do."

Sunny felt a little troubled. Since Nephis was addressing a group, and not him personally, her words were not equal to an order. Still, he felt a bit of a chill while hearing these words.

But she was right.

They did, indeed, know what to do. All of this had been discussed over and over again already. The cohort was prepared as well as it could have been, considering the lack of information about the state of the Defiled city and its current ruler.

Torment…

Sunny frowned.

She had to know that they were coming. Why wasn't anyone here to welcome them to Verge, then? All of them had expected to be ambushed by the Defiled abominations the moment the Chain Breaker left the black void. And yet, nothing happened.

What was the Last Plague planning?

Feeling uneasy, he went about raising the ship's sails. They were going to sail on water, for now, to not be so easily spotted.

The seven suns drowned in the water, suffusing it with beautiful light. The impenetrable darkness devoured the sky — now that Sunny knew about the great swarm of monstrous butterflies hiding somewhere out there, in that darkness, the night seemed far more dreadful. Almost impossibly so.

But there were monsters hiding in the River, as well.

Before dawn came, the cohort clashed with several Defiled abominations. Each of them was more powerful than the Nightmare Creatures they had usually fought upstream, and far more cunning. Thankfully, the might of the seven Masters was more than enough to deal with these solitary abominations.

Although it took some effort, none of the Defiled managed to escape. Those who tried were chased after and finished off by Kai, who was the fastest of them all. His arrows could strike true from a startling distance, as well — armed with incredible sight and a powerful bow, the archer was a deadly presence on the Great River.

Much more dangerous than the solitary abominations were the waters themselves. Here near the Source, they were turbulent and unpredictable, often hiding fatal hazards. The Chain Breaker avoided

the truly inescapable ones thanks to Cassie's intuition, and fought through the rest, protected by its enchantments and the sacred tree.

Finally, the sky turned bright again. By the time all seven suns climbed high, the first of the two days they had been supposed to spend traveling to Verge came to an end.

At that moment, they planned to raise the ship above the water, so that it would not be pulled downstream by the current, and organize a scouting mission to stealthily approach the Defiled city.

However… that plan had to be scrambled.

It was because, unexpectedly, they had already reached Verge.

Or rather, its foundation.

Sunny peered ahead, his expression incredulous. His eyes widened slightly.

'These madmen… how did they create it?'

In front of them, the eternally flowing waters of the Great River turned to ice. A vast landmass formed by it stretched as far as the eye could see, disappearing beyond the horizon — too great to be called a mere island, and somehow entirely unaffected by the current.

Frozen in place.

There was sand and lifeless soil covering the rough surface of the endless plain of ice, with rolling hills and dry riverbeds. Skeletal trees rose into the air, bereft of leaves or life. Here and there, mounds of black stone rose, forming a forest of twisted pillars.

In short, Sunny saw something that he had never expected to see in the Tomb of Ariel…

Land.

Chapter-1549: Scouting Mission

Everyone was more than a little stunned by the sight of the massive landmass in front of them. They had seen Verge from far away, while traversing the empty void — however, the ice and the pale soil covering it were indistinguishable from the flowing water at that distance. Nothing in the records left behind by the sybils indicated that the foundation of the city was so monumental, either.

All that was mentioned on the slates, as well as passed by word of mouth between the citizens of Fallen Grace, was that the Seekers of Truth had established a city at the farthest reaches of the past, as close to the inception of time as they could, to serve as a staging ground for their attempts at reaching the Estuary.

So, they had expected something similar to the fleet-cities of the sybils, or perhaps a settlement built on a massive carapace of an enormous abomination, like Twilight. Maybe a levitating island like the one Aletheia had created, or even a network of them.

What they had not expected was an entire land of ice surrounding Verge.

Sunny was both troubled and impressed.

There was a whole day of sailing on the Chain Breaker left between them and the Defiled City. That was a vast distance to cover on foot, at least for a mundane human. Which meant that the mass of ice forming the foundation of Verge was truly immense.

…Which posed a problem.

Sunny studied the lifeless landscape of the frozen land in front of them, then glanced at Nephis.

"So, what are we supposed to do?"

Now that they couldn't sail further, there was a decision to be made. Namely, they had three possible paths, each offering its own pitfalls and benefits.

The simplest path was to raise the Chain Breaker into the air and proceed forward, flying above the vast sheet of ice. This, of course, would offer them the highest speed and defensive advantage, since the graceful vessel was nothing less than a mobile fortress.

It would be very hard not to notice a ship flying above ground, though. So, they would alert the Defiled of their approach long before reaching the city.

The second path was to abandon the ship and proceed toward Verge on foot. That way, they would become much slower, and much more exposed once the fighting started. However, it was much easier for seven humans to infiltrate the landmass stealthily, remaining hidden until the very moment they reached the Defiled city — or even sneaked past its walls, reaching the First Seeker unseen.

The third path was to circle around the landmass first, studying it in detail from afar, and come up with the plan of attack later. This was the most passive approach, but not the safest — the longer they spent in these dangerous waters, the higher the chance that Torment would sense their presence.

Nephis hesitated for a while, thinking.

"What are your opinions?"

She addressed the members of the cohort, wishing to make use of their experience and intuition. However, the opinions were split.

Some were in favor of leaving the ship behind and using stealth to approach Verge, others did not trust the treacherous expanse of the desolate landmass and wanted to keep the durable hull of the Chain Breaker between themselves and whatever could be hiding beneath the ice.

Sunny himself was undecided, as well.

He felt somber at the fact that he would not be able to use the shell

of the onyx serpent in the upcoming battle, considering that Verge lay deep inland.

However, there were plenty of other shells he could create, by now, including the giant version of his human body… and even though most of them were not as detailed and powerful as the great sea serpent yet, the versatility they offered made up for that.

Overall, he felt that having solid ground beneath their feet was a good thing. He was sick and tired of fighting while surrounded by water, away from their natural element. So, perhaps not having the hull of the Chain Breaker to rely on was not that bad.

Nephis listened to everyone, then turned to Cassie, who had remained silent up until then.

"What do you think?"

The blind girl was not in a hurry to speak. After thinking for a while, she shrugged and said:

"We don't need to decide right now. We wanted to anchor the Chain Breaker and scout the approach to the city stealthily, anyway… all that changed is that we can do it on foot now, instead of swimming and flying. So, why don't we explore this desolate place first before making the final decision?"

Sunny moved slightly when she spoke. He threw a long look at the blind girl, and then asked nonchalantly:

"What is the best way to explore this place quickly, in your opinion?"

Cassie hesitated for a moment, then said thoughtfully:

"One person has to stay with the ship. The rest should split into three teams. One team will proceed straight forward, the other two will move slightly inland and then move along the western and eastern shores of the island. Everyone will regroup back on the Chain Breaker tomorrow and share what they discovered."

His expression darkened slightly.

Nephis, meanwhile, nodded.

"Splitting up might be dangerous, but it's the only way to cover a lot of ground quickly. We can reduce the danger by making sure that none of the satellite groups strays too far away from the central one — that way, each team can be reinforced by another promptly, should the need arise."

She remained silent for a few moments, pondering.

"Mordret should be the in forward team — his ability to see through reflections will allow him to keep an eye on both satellite teams at the same time without sacrificing strength. He would also be able to travel between reflections to aid them. The second member of the central team should be someone who does not have a mobility Ability… they could be transported through the mirror realm…"

She considered things for a bit before finally assigning each member of the cohort the optimal role.

Mordret and Jet were assigned to the central scouting team. Kai and Effie would explore the eastern reaches of the frozen landmass. Nephis herself would be exploring the western reaches, accompanied by Sunny.

Cassie would be remaining on the Chain Breaker.

It was as solid of a plan as they could come up with, considering the situation. The three teams were powerful enough to defend themselves, while at the same time being flexible enough to swiftly come to the aid of the other teams.

The plan was solid…

However, Sunny disagreed with it.

Chapter-1550: Change of Plans

Nephis had offered a good plan, one that was both solid and flexible enough to hopefully keep all of them alive while accomplishing the goal. Each member was assigned a role that suited the situation best, making all three teams highly mobile and capable of defending themselves in case there was an ambush.

Cassie, meanwhile, was the least suitable for swift movement and stealth, while at the same time being the most familiar with steering the Chain Breaker — so, she was the best candidate for staying on the ship.

And that was precisely what Sunny did not like, even if he chose not to share his reasoning.

By now, he was thoroughly confused about what he felt toward Cassie. Was he suspicious of her? Or concerned for her? Or simply acting paranoid, his thoughts muddied by the Sin of Solace? He did not know, but he did know that as soon as she spoke, his intuition raised an alarm.

The blind girl did not directly volunteer herself to remain alone on the Chain Breaker, but she did not need to. As soon as they had decided to leave someone behind, she was the obvious choice. Instead of telling Nephis to choose her, Cassie could simply let her come to the conclusion without anyone's help.

…And while Sunny was not sure about the reason for his anxiety, he was absolutely certain that Cassie had engineered this situation on purpose. For some reason, she wanted to send the cohort off and stay on the Chain Breaker alone.

Why? Was it to lure them into a trap?

Of course, no. Sunny had already established that suspecting the

blind girl in wishing to harm the cohort was preposterous.

However… he could easily imagine her going on some stupid, self-sacrificial quest by piloting the flying ship into the heart of Verge and dropping it on the First Seeker. Or maybe drawing Torment away from the city at the cost of her life, to let the cohort win.

Which was not to say that his imagination reflected reality. There can be any number of explanations for Cassie's subtle manipulation, from completely innocent to absolutely ominous.

In any case, he did not like it.

Which was why, after Nephis explained the plan, Sunny shook his head.

"I disagree. The members of the three teams will be able to cover each other, true… but what about the person staying on the ship? Once we travel far inland, they'll be completely alone. If something happens, not only will Cassie be in danger, but we also risk losing the ship and becoming stranded with no way to retreat."

Nephis looked at him and frowned slightly. There was a silent question in her eyes, but Sunny pretended not to see it.

Eventually, she nodded:

"That… is a valid concern. Do you have a suggestion?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Yeah. I think I should stay on the ship with her. My Aspect is the most versatile, so I'll be able to deal with all kinds of situations. That would leave you without a partner, though, so the number of teams should be reduced from three to two — one team consisting of you and Mordret, the other of Effie, Jet, and Kai."

He smiled.

"Mordret can use his Ascended Ability to transport both of you, while Kai can carry both Jet and Effie in the Beast Locket. Therefore… everyone will be much safer."

Not to mention that Mordret would not be able to pull any tricks under Neph's nose, considering she was more or less immune to his Awakened Ability.

Nephis stared at Sunny for a bit, a subtle hint of confusion hiding in her eyes. His suggestion was not unreasonable, though, so she nodded eventually.

"Alright. Let us proceed with that team composition, then."

There was no time to waste and no need to say anything else, so everyone immediately started preparing for the mission. Effie brought up the straw basket Sunny had masterfully weaved for her, cushioning it with a blanket.

That basket was meant to be the infant's crib. Safely wrapped, the baby was going to spend the next few days on the idyllic and perfectly safe meadow inside Effie's Supreme Memory, sleeping and being visited by his mom, or other members of the cohort, every few hours… until the final battle.

That was a hell of a way to spend the first days of one's life, but such an arrangement was the best one they had been able to come up with.

Eventually, the five members of the cohort whose task it was to scout the frozen landmass were ready to depart. Sunny watched them from the bow of the ship, not feeling the need to say or feel something poignant.

This was not a farewell, anyway. One way or the other, they were going to see each other tomorrow — either when the scouts returned, or when things went south and the Chain Breaker flew forward to rescue them.

The ship approached the shore of the frozen island and came to a halt, hovering just above the water.

Five figures jumped from it, landing on the ice.

Nephis was first, wearing the Starlight Legion Armor and wielding the somber silver blade — a unique hybrid Memory of both the

Transcendent and Supreme Ranks, the result of the most complex and intricate sorcery Sunny had woven to date. The Crown of Dawn, which had survived the annihilating conflagration in Twilight, was resting on her head, empowering all other Memories around her.

Kai simply glided to the shore. He was clad in the Supreme armor crafted from the ivory dragon scales, wielding a Transcendent bow of the Fifth Tier. Another Supreme Memory, a lethal Severing Arrow, was ready to be summoned the moment he had need of it. The cohort's resident Dragonslayer was as deadly as one could be.

Effie made a bit of noise when she landed on the ice, enveloped by her own Supreme armor — the legacy of the Sun Prince, which made her look like a beautiful statue of polished steel. Incredibly, she seemed to have mostly recovered from bearing a child, already. Even if there was some remnant malady holding her back, she did not show it.

Flashing a defiant smile, the huntress summoned her spear and walked forward.

Jet was right behind her, looking like she was born to exist in this land of ice. Chilling mist swirled around her, pierced by the somber glow of her cold blue eyes. Then, the mist flowed into her hands and took the shape of a sinister war scythe, its blade glinting eerily as it seemed to cut the rays of sunlight.

Finally, there was Mordret, wearing his own Ascended body. The Prince of Nothing did not have particularly powerful Memories, or insidiously lethal Reflections to fight for him. However, he was perhaps the most dangerous of them all.

An easy smile played on Mordret's lips as he followed Nephis.

The enemies of the five Masters could only lament their fate.

The five of them separated into two groups and moved stealthily across the desolate landscape, soon disappearing from view.

…Leaving Sunny and Cassie alone aboard the Chain Breaker.

Chapter-1551: Left Behind

The five members of the cohort were gone, off to scout the approach to Verge. Sunny felt uneasy and worried about their safety, but not tremendously so. Each of them was a powerhouse in their own right, and possessed a wealth of experience when it came to moving stealthily through a region infested with Nightmare Creatures.

Nephis, Kai, and Effie were veterans of the Forgotten Shore, where humans had been at the very bottom of the food chain. Effie, who had hunted in the Dark City alone for many years, was especially proficient in navigating dangerous terrain without alerting anyone or anything of her presence.

Jet had already been a frightening existence before the Southern Campaign, and grew only more tenacious after going through the disastrous months in the Antarctic Center, followed by serving in the military reconnaissance in East Antarctica.

Mordret was by far the most slippery of the five, so even if Sunny was inclined to care about his well-being, the bastard was the last person in the Tomb of Ariel he would be worried about.

So, the scouts were more than capable of fulfilling their mission unscathed.

If anything, Sunny was more concerned about himself and Cassie. The restlessness he had felt for the past few months reached an apex, telling him that something was about to happen.

The Sin of Solace was not shy about voicing his opinion, either:

"You've done it now, fool. What madness made you think that staying here alone with her was a good idea? It wasn't me, that's for sure. Now, you are completely defenseless against whatever new betrayal she had in mind, with no one to cover your back."

Sunny looked at him somberly, then turned away.

Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare were still aboard the Chain Breaker. So, the loathsome wraith was wrong — there was someone to cover his back. There were plenty.

'No, that's wrong…'

Why would he even need that? Cassie was not going to betray the cohort. That was just his paranoia talking.

Sunny frowned, realizing that this state of his was a bit concerning. He had grown so used to the Sin of Solace that listening to the apparition's poison was already a habit. It had failed to drive him insane due to Sunny's robust mental defenses… but maybe the sinister whispers of the cursed sword were having some effect on him, after all.

Then again, maybe it was simply the result of the incredible mental strain he had been exposed to in the Tomb of Ariel.

'Is that how the Mad Prince started to slip, as well?'

Feeling grim, Sunny filtered out the incessant whispers of the sword wraith and went about his business.

Cassie softly landed the Chain Breaker on the water and brought it close to the shore of the ice land, hiding it in the shadow of a tall rock mound. Sunny moored the ship, making sure that the ropes could be cut at a moment's notice.

Then, there was nothing for them to do but wait and remain on guard.

While Sunny was consumed by alarm and doubt, Cassie seemed perfectly at ease. If she had been surprised by his sudden decision to stay back — which, in all honesty, went against how he would usually act — she did not show it. The blind girl remained at the stern of the ship, ready to activate the runic circle and send the Chain Breaker into the air the moment there was danger.

Sunny, meanwhile, was in charge of watching out for said danger.

One of his shadows continued to keep an eye on Cassie, while the other five spread out to have a better view of the environment. He commanded Saint and Fiend to remain on the ship and sent Nightmare to hide in the shadows on top of the mound they were moored to.

Hours passed in tense silence, with nothing happening.

…It was strange, really.

Torment had been like a scarecrow in Sunny's mind. He had enjoyed the benefit of having Cassie around for long enough to know how potent and miraculous, albeit not applicable in a direct confrontation for the most part, her powers were. So, he was understandably wary of the Defiled version of the blind seer, not to mention if that Defiled was a Saint.

What was Torment's Transformation Ability? How had her other Abilities grown, and what was she capable of?

There were no answers, which only made Sunny feel more nervous. If there was one thing he did know, however, it was that the Last Plague would be attuned to fate and revelations to an incredible degree. Which meant that she would have means of knowing when she was in danger.

The arrival of the cohort was definitely a dire danger. They had already exterminated the other Plagues, after all. So, Sunny had been fully prepared to fight their way to Verge through a sea of abominations.

However, there had been no one waiting for them when they descended from the black void. There was no one laying in ambush at the shores of the frozen landmass, either. Even now, when the members of the cohort had split up into three teams, nothing appeared to attack them while they were separated from each other.

Why was that?

Was Torment, perhaps, unable to receive any visions of fate in the Tomb of Ariel, just like Cassie was unable to see anything except

darkness in hers?

That would certainly make things easier.

If Cassie was really unable to see the future…

Was Torment's strange passivity the result of the Mad Prince's schemes?

Sunny was full of alarm and ready for something perilous to happen, but nothing was happening. That only added to his frustration.

Cassie remained on the stern, acting like nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Hours slowly passed, and then, the night came. The seven suns drowned in the water, and the Great River ignited with a soft, iridescent glow. Even the massive plain of ice shone dimly, illuminating itself with a pale, ghostly radiance. Bathed in that radiance, pillars of black stone were like a forest of colossal, dead trees.

Sunny remained on the deck for a while, looking in the direction of Verge and wondering how the members of the cohort were doing. After a while, he went to the stern and spoke with Cassie about taking turns guarding the ship.

"My shadows will wake me up instantly if something happens. So… if there's danger, just keep yourself alive for a few seconds. I'll be there before you know it."

The blind girl nodded seriously.

"Of course. Go, and try to rest well. There probably won't be a chance to do so after the scouts return."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then descended below deck and entered his cabin. Laying down on his cot, he closed his eyes and relaxed his body. He also controlled his heartbeat and breathing, making them as calm and natural as he could.

Pretending to be asleep.

But, of course, Sunny was not asleep.

Instead, he was observing Cassie.

If she really intended to do something in secret, and his decision to stay behind put a wrench in her plans, now would be the perfect moment for her to act.

And, indeed, after some time passed…

Cassie did.

Chapter-1552: Lifeboat

'What is she doing?'

Laying in the darkness while pretending to sleep, Sunny suppressed the desire to frown. Cassie had left the runic circle, picked up the Guiding Light, and slowly walked across the deck. As she did, a hurricane of white sparks rose around her, slowly forming into a humanoid figure.

It was the echo of the Defiled sybil she had received in Fallen Grace. The eerie thing had survived Twilight, although just barely. Now, her wounds were healed. Even her flowing red dress mended itself, as did her veil. The Echo followed the blind seer, the hem of her red garment hovering a couple centimeters above the ancient wood.

Just like always, her movements were too smooth to be the result of walking. Sunny had seen what was hiding behind that dress once, and he never wanted to see it again.

Nevertheless, he continued watching.

By then, Cassie had passed the sacred tree and was most of the way to the bow of the ship, near Ananke's ketch. She did not, however, proceed any further. Stopping near the ketch, she silently gave a command to her Echo.

Soon, the boat was lowered into the water. The masts were affixed in their grooves, and the sails were raised. Gliding down with the help of the Quiet Dancer, Cassie took a seat at the helmsman's bench and summoned a different Memory.

It was a wooden staff she had used on the Forgotten Shore — one of the three Memories from her First Nightmare. The Endless Spring was now with Sunny, the Evertwine was with Nephis, and only the staff remained in Cassie's own soul arsenal.

Its enchantment was capable of summoning wind.

Aiming the staff at the sails of the ketch, Cassie activated the enchantment and sent the boat moving away from the Chain Breaker.

Sunny's shadow, of course, was already hiding under one of the masts.

Back in his cabin, Sunny continued to pretend to be asleep.

The night was silent, with only the sound of waves breaking against the hull of the Chain Breaker disturbing the quiet. The water glowed softly, and bathed in that glow, Ananke's ketch was slowly traveling along the shore of the frozen land.

'...Goddammit.'

Although Sunny was more or less certain that Cassie was hiding something, he had hoped to be proven wrong until the very last moment.

However, he had been right all along.

"You mean I was right."

The grating voice of the Sin of Solace sounded like thunder in the silence. Sunny refused to react, knowing that Cassie was most likely perceiving the world through his senses. As long as he kept his eyes closed and controlled his breathing and heartbeat, though, she had no way of knowing that he was awake.

Because she could only share the senses of those marked by her Ability, not read their thoughts.

"That's the question though, is it?"

The sword wraith laughed.

"Am I just a figment of your imagination, or am I more real than you give me credit for? If it's the former, then I am merely a thought construct, and Cassie has no way of knowing of my presence. She said so herself, back on Aletheia's Island. But… can anything she said

be trusted? Because if she does hear me, then your little performance was just rendered useless. Oh… sorry."

Sitting in the ketch, Cassie showed no sign of having heard what the Sin of Solace said. And yet… by now, Sunny knew that she was a remarkable actress. Her effortless switch between her usual unassuming persona and the magnetic image of Dusk was proof.

Could Cassie perceive the Sin of Solace, or not?

If not… then how had she become aware of the time loop on Aletheia's island?

What was she trying to accomplish right now?

He forced himself to remain motionless, continuing to observe her.

'I'll wait until she is about to exit the range of Shadow Control before taking action.'

Sunny could control his shadows from a vast distance. It was also the maximum distance to which he could travel via Shadow Step. So, as long as Cassie remained within that range, he would be able to appear next to her in an instant.

And by remaining passive, he would hopefully learn what secret Cassie was keeping, and what she was planning. Knowing that, he would be able to decide what to do.

If she was going to leave the range at which he could reach her, though… then all bets were off.

Sunny was not about to let Cassie put herself in danger, and just on the off chance that what she wanted to do could put the rest of the cohort in harm's way, he had to intervene as well.

He had remained silent and tolerant of her for long enough. Today, on the eve of the decisive battle of this dreadful Nightmare, the truth would come out… one way or another.

The ketch continued to sail along the shore of the icy island, surrounded by the beautifully glowing water. Up above, the night sky

was impenetrably dark, hiding a numerous legions of slumbering horrors. Somewhere, not too far away, the abominable remains of Aletheia of the Nine were sprawling through the city of Verge, waiting to be destroyed by the challengers of the Tomb of Ariel…

Or infect their souls and bodies with seeds of Corruption, making them a part of her Defiled legion.

Cassie sailed further and further away from the Chain Breaker, making Sunny feel grave. The Sin of Solace continued to whisper into his ear, spouting all kinds of vile accusations.

Finally, to Sunny's indignation, he felt the sailboat was getting too far away. If he lingered any longer, the ketch would slip from his reach, cutting his connection to the shadow.

So, taking a deep sigh, Sunny opened his eyes and dissolved into shadows.

A moment later, he stepped out of them inside the ketch, standing a few meters away from Cassie. She was sitting on the helmsman's bench, accompanied by her Echo. Her face was illuminated by the soft radiance of the Guiding Light and the pale glow of the iridescent water.

Sunny's face, meanwhile, was drowning in shadows.

Letting out a sigh, Sunny looked at the blind girl and asked, his voice neutral:

"...Where are you going?"

Chapter-1553: Shadow and Seer

After asking the question, Sunny sat down on a bench across from Cassie.

There they were, alone in a boat, just the two of them… or rather, the four of them.

The Sin of Solace landed on the bench next to Sunny, a sinister smile twisting his lips. His face was hateful, just like always… of course, it was also the exact same face as Sunny's.

Cassie was sitting on the helmsman's bench a few meters away from them, holding the steering oar. The Echo of the dead sybil was there, too, side by side with her. Since both were wearing flowing garments of vibrant red fabric, traditional for the priestesses of Fallen Grace, they looked quite similar too.

The most visible difference between them was that Cassie's exquisite face was bare, while the monstrous Echo was wearing a veil.

Cassie's beautiful blue eyes were full of life, as well, even though she was blind. The sybils's eyes, though, were eerily empty and devoid of life. Her hollow stare made shivers run down Sunny's spine — he felt that way every time he saw an Echo of a human. Granted, this one was made in the image of a human who had succumbed to the Defilement.

The four of them sat opposite each other, surrounded by invisible tension.

Despite Sunny's sudden appearance, though, Cassie remained calm. She deactivated the enchantment of her wooden staff and lowered it, then said in an even voice:

"I thought you were asleep."

A faint smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

"Did you?"

He had been reasonably sure that his small act had fooled the blind seer, but now that he saw her lack of reaction, a worm of doubt entered his mind. Had she known he was pretending all along?

The Sin of Solace chuckled, staring at Cassie with hate and disdain in his gaze.

"It seems that you've been played like a fiddle, pitiful worm. Even after all my warnings… gods, how frustrating! You should have struck this traitor down long ago. Just look at her… she must despise you just as much as I do!"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched, but he suppressed the desire to rebuke the sword wraith. That, however, only gave the apparition the opportunity to press his mocking tirade:

"You truly are a revolting creature, are you not? A lowly, despicable slave… and look, here is the woman who made you into a slave. She betrayed you once, and yet, you allowed the snake to warm her way back into your good graces. You have forgotten her sins, and as gratitude, the blind traitor is about to stab you in the back once again!"

At that point, Cassie took a deep breath.

...Then, she turned her head slightly, facing the Sin of Solace, and spoke, her voice trembling with long-suppressed anger:

"Can you shut your foul mouth, wretch? Who asked you to talk? Be quiet for once!"

Sunny was taken a little aback by that show of emotions.

The Sin of Solace stared at her vindictively, but did fall silent. A satisfied smile appeared on his face.

Sunny smiled, too.

"So… you can perceive him, after all."

Cassie's mask of composure had finally cracked, revealing an ocean of emotion raging below. However, she regained that composure in a moment and scoffed, throwing a contemptuous glance at the sword wraith.

"So what if I can?"

Sunny shrugged.

"You lied to me, though, on Aletheia's Island. When you said that you couldn't."

Cassie met his gaze without flinching. Her voice was even:

"...So what if I lied? Yes, I can perceive that insufferable wraith through you. I can also perceive your shadows, and what they see. What about it?"

He sighed.

'Damnation.'

So, he was wrong all along. Sunny had assumed that Cassie's Ascended Ability did not affect his shadows, since they were separate beings from him, and she did not have shadow sense. She had also never shown or acted upon the ability to mark his shadows.

So, Sunny had been fooled.

Played like a fool even.

He was still smiling, but that smile did not reach his eyes.

"So you were aware that I had been watching you for the past few months."

She shrugged.

"Sure."

If Cassie was aware that Sunny was suspicious of her… then the

situation was completely different from how he imagined it to be. Not only would she have been able to hide her secrets from him, but even the things she had shown him had been shown on purpose.

Like the chamber with the well and the countless journals stored in a runic chest.

Knowing that his shadows were watching her, Cassie would only be able to act freely if she was outside the range of Shadow Control. That was why she wanted to stay behind while Sunny joined the scouting teams…

His pupils widened slightly.

'No…'

If Cassie had known that he was suspicious of her… she would have known that he would refuse to leave her alone on the Chain Breaker, as well. They were too familiar with each other for her to fail predicting that action of his.

Which meant that the blind seer's true purpose was not to remain alone on the flying ship…

Instead, it was for the two of them to remain there together, away from the other members of the cohort.

And he had done exactly what she wanted him to do.

Suddenly, a hint of a strange and cold emotion settled in Sunny's heart. Was it… fear?

Yes, it was. It was the fear of fighting a battle of schemes against a powerful oracle. Cassie might not have been the strongest of them in a direct confrontation, but being caught in a net of schemes and manipulation that someone who could see the future had created…

Was, honestly, nothing short of terrifying.

Sunny deemed himself a master of deceit and manipulation. There was only one person he had met who could truly be considered a fearsome adversary in that field — Mordret.

But now, he was quickly reconsidering that statement.

Actually, there was another contender among them.

And that newcomer was perhaps the most fearsome of the three.

Looking at the blind girl, who remained calm and composed, Sunny leaned back and asked, his tone relaxed:

"So, why did you want to see me alone, Cassie?"

He lingered for a moment and then added, his voice remaining even:

"...Or should I call you Torment?"

Chapter-1554: Familiar Face

The words had been said, echoing in the beautiful darkness of the glowing night. Devoid of the wind, the sails of the ketch fell down. The boat slowly came to a stop, drifting in the current.

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, as motionless as the Echo of the Defiled sybil sitting by her side. Then, she asked, her voice tinged with a hint of amusement:

"Should I call you the Mad Prince, then?"

As Sunny's expression changed, she chuckled lightly.

"Gods… come now. I know that you only asked that question to probe me for a reaction, but how does it make sense? I'm not Torment."

Sunny frowned, disappointed at the fact that he had not been able to get more out of Cassie. He was considering his next question silently when she turned to face her Echo and said, throwing his thoughts into disarray:

"She is."

He froze, stunned by those words.

Then, Sunny slowly moved his gaze to the silent Echo.

The red garment, the empty gaze, the veil hiding her face…

'How?'

Back when they met in Fallen Grace, Cassie said that she came to possess this Echo after slaying the sybil who had succumbed to the Defilement on the day of her entering the Nightmare. The two looked alike, true… but both Sunny and Nephis simply assumed that it was

because both the slain woman and Dusk had been sybils ruling the same city.

The Echo was too eerie and revolting, making Sunny unwilling to learn what was hiding behind the red veil. Therefore, he had never tried to look at the creature's face.

The most he had done was glance at its weave, but even then, most of his attention had been focused on the artificial Echo created by the enchanters of Clan Valor — the long destroyed blade mannequin.

Now, however…

Cassie raised her hand and pulled on the Echo's veil, removing it.

Underneath it, an exquisitely beautiful face was revealed… one identical to her own, but devoid of life. The Echo of the sybil… of Torment… was hollow and expressionless, like all Echoes were.

There was a subtle expression on Cassie's face, though. A strange mix of revulsion, sorrow, and even a hint of tenderness.

It was not every day that one chanced to look upon a soulless copy of their own dead self, after all.

Gears were spinning in Sunny's head at impossible speed, trying to digest the stunning revelation of the eerie Echo's true nature.

'Torment… is dead.'

She had been dead all along.

Of course, he had suspected that something like that was the case.

That suspicion was a recent one, and had only entered his mind after they landed near Verge. Sunny could not accept that the fearsome oracle of the Defilement was not aware of their approach. It would have been fine if it was just Mordret and him, wearing Weaver's Mask — both of them could hide themselves from divination.

But the other members of the cohort had no defense against those who were attuned to fate, which made any attempts at hiding useless.

Nevertheless, the Chain Breaker had not been ambushed as it left the black void. The forces of the Defilement had not descended upon them once they reached the vast island of ice, either.

It was as though Torment had somehow been prevented from acting against them… or was not in Verge at all. Which was strange, considering that she had successfully gotten rid of the Dread Lord and was supposed to be the new tyrant of Defiled City.

He contemplated the thought that the Mad Prince had schemed against the Last Plague, as well.

But the truth was much more stunning.

Cassie had never received an Echo for slaying the Defiled sybil. There was no Echo of a sybil…

Instead, she had received this Echo for slaying Torment herself. Cassie had killed her Defiled copy long before Sunny and Nephis even arrived at Fallen Grace.

He shivered.

Why keep it a secret, then?

Cassie studied the Echo's face for a while, then sighed and turned away. After a short pause, she said in a slightly stifled tone:

"I… suggest you don't look her in the eyes for too long. It's rather unpleasant."

The Sin of Solace hurriedly looked away.

Sunny slowly gathered his thoughts, still reeling from the shock. He was struggling to grasp the new information… it was too staggering, changing everything he had known about the Nightmare.

Eventually, he asked, his voice even:

"...When?"

Cassie shrugged.

"It was… about six months after I became Dusk, I think? Of course, that was not the first time we met, just the last."

Sunny remembered the chamber hidden under the Temple of Dusk, with a breach in its floor leading to the depths of the Great River. Was that how Torment had entered Fallen Grace and come into contact with Cassie? Was that where they had fought, and where the Defiled oracle died?

But how could it be possible? How could Cassie have defeated a harrowing Plague alone, despite all the time Torment should have had to accumulate power and information to prepare for their eventual clash?

Staring at two identical, beautiful faces — one familiar and full of life, the other alien and empty — he suddenly felt very uncomfortable.

"Can you… put that veil back on?"

He hated human Echoes, and he hated to see the Echo of one of his closest friends even more. Looking at the soulless copy of Torment was like looking at Cassie's corpse, which made him feel disgusted.

The blind girl hesitated for a moment, then put the veil back on, hiding the Echo's face behind it. Torment's empty eyes, however, remained visible, staring at Sunny without any emotion.

Cassie sighed.

"At least… she is at peace now. That is a mercy."

Sunny shifted his gaze, studied her for a few moments, and then asked his next question:

"How?"

The blind girl smiled.

"How else? Of course, it was arranged by the Mad Prince."

She fell silent for a second, and then added, her voice wistful:

"...By the Mad Prince and Torment herself, to be precise. The two of them, you see, were behind all of this together."

Chapter-1555: Partners in Crime

The ketch was drifting in the current, slowly being pulled toward the icy shore. Cassie remained motionless on the helmsman's bench, her hand resting on the steering oar's handle. Her unseeing gaze was distant.

After a while, she sighed.

"I guess I should explain it from the start."

A crooked smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"That would certainly be nice… considering that you have arranged for this moment for that exact purpose."

By then, he had plenty of time to realize that Cassie had manipulated the events of the previous days for the exact purpose of having this conversation with Sunny away from the ears of their companions.

Why? What did she want to achieve? And why now, just before the final battle of this Nightmare?

Did they have to talk alone because the Mad Prince and Torment had orchestrated this entire cycle of the Great River alone?

He was about to find out.

Sunny felt a lot of pressure drain from his heart, knowing that Torment was gone and the only obstacle between the cohort and salvation was the harrowing, but mindless First Seeker. But, at the same time, he was on edge because of what was happening between him and Cassie.

The ease with which she was revealing her secrets was… ominous.

The blind girl remained silent for a moment, then picked up the

Guiding Light and rested it on her shoulder, the light of the radiant crystal affixed to its top illuminating her face.

"I did not lie when I said that I only saw darkness in my visions after entering the Nightmare."

Sunny shifted slightly.

'Why is she bringing that up?'

Cassie smiled.

"However, that was not because of the nature of the Tomb of Ariel itself. Rather, my inability to perceive its secrets was engineered by Torment. My abilities were suppressed with the help of a sorcerous item. You should be able to guess what that item was."

Sunny's eyes narrowed. An image appeared in his memory… the image of golden shackles wrapped around Cassie's hands, connected by a golden chain.

The chain she had broken before leaving Fallen Grace.

The blind girl nodded.

"Yes. Those shackles were worn by Dusk, and therefore, they were on my wrists the moment I entered the Nightmare. Dusk had not created the suppression enchantment, though… instead, it was Torment. She had countless years to prepare for my eventual return, after all."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, his gaze turning grim:

"Why break them, then?"

Cassie shrugged.

"Because I needed to, in order to survive what was to come. Aletheia's Island, Twilight… we would not have made it out alive if my powers were crippled. So, it was worth the risk. Plus, the visions come to me in my dreams. And your Shadow, Nightmare, has been destroying my dreams one after another. So, I was safe from learning the truth of the Estuary as long as we were together."

She paused for a moment and continued, her voice growing quieter:

"My past self — one who was destined to become Torment — did not have that luxury, though. In her own cycle, she managed to create the suppression enchantment to protect herself from the truth. But she knew that the Mad Prince was coming for her, and she could not escape him."

A strange smile appeared on her face.

"Then again, she wasn't planning to. She did, however, create several countermeasures to achieve her goals even after her soul and sanity were consumed by Corruption."

Cassie pointed at the silent Echo sitting by her side.

"This Echo is not very powerful, you see. Because most of Torment's power simply cannot be used by an Echo. Her power has to do with memories, with remembering and forgetting... something that Echoes aren't capable of. So, she put restrictions into her own mind, turning herself into a broken person who acted according to a set of predetermined choices.

Almost as if creating a crude, miniature version of fate."

She shook her head.

"Of course, that alone was not enough to escape the madness of Corruption. No matter how well she prepared, the Defilement was going to turn her into a being who could not be controlled. Unless, of course, she received help from the Mad Prince, who was able to preserve a fragment of his humanity thanks to that loathsome wraith of yours.

With his help, she could truly turn her Defiled self into an instrument of her will."

Sunny shifted slightly and asked, his voice full of doubt:

"And how did they accomplish that? How could a Defiled Saint be controlled?"

Cassie faced him and remained silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"How else? By making the Dread Lord use his authority against her, of course. The Mad Prince added fuel to the paranoia the tyrant of Verge felt toward Torment, and then put the idea of what commands to give her into his mind. Therefore, two of the Plagues became capable of resisting their vile natures, to a degree. And thus, Torment and the Mad Prince became perfect conspirators."

She moved the steering oar slightly, turning the ketch so that its bow faced the nearing shore of the ice island.

"After the Plagues reached the Estuary and used it to invade the next cycle of the Great River, the two of them meticulously prepared the playing field for the arrival of us, the new challengers. Eventually, the Mad Prince trapped two of the Plagues on Aletheia's Island, and two more in Twilight. Then, he finished the Key of the Estuary and entered the Source, becoming you."

Sunny looked at her somberly, then shifted his gaze and glanced at the Echo of Torment.

"Why didn't Torment do the same, then? Why remain and come into contact with you? Why attack you, forcing you to kill her?"

Cassie's expression turned cold.

She lingered for a while, then smiled darkly.

"The Mad Prince had to enter the Source to make sure that you possess the Key of the Estuary at the start of the Nightmare, thus protecting you from the truth harbored by the Sin of Solace. Perhaps he could have created a Memory that contained both the suppression enchantment and the enchantment that would allow it to be transferred to me at the start of the cycle.

But… one of the two had to stay behind."

Chapter-1556: Dangerous Knowledge

Shadows suddenly danced across Cassie's beautiful face as she lowered the Guiding Light.

"That was because Torment had a message to deliver to me, so that her wish could be fulfilled. And that message could only be delivered face-to-face."

She took a deep breath.

"So, she infiltrated Fallen Grace and modified the shackles that bound Dusk. She also wrote an accord of what happened in the previous cycles and left it for me to read. Finally, she crawled into the Temple of Dusk and met me, delivering the message."

Cassie's voice turned cold, and her expression became ruthless:

"However, she was still a Defiled. And, unlike the Mad Prince, she did not have a whisper of Ariel to keep her from losing all of her humanity. All she had was a cruel weave of restrictions and commands to push her toward the desired outcome, and that weave was not flawless."

She looked at Sunny without any humor in her eyes.

"So, after completing the mission of delivering her message to me, she instantly attempted to consume me. She was still being held back by the authority of the Dread Lord, though, and so… she died by my hand, instead."

There was silence for a while. The ketch reached the shore of the icy island and scraped against it, coming to a stop.

Sunny stared at Cassie, his thoughts in turmoil.

'So… she knew everything, all along.'

It took him a long time to learn the truth about the Great River, the Source and the Estuary, the Six Plagues and their connection to the members of the cohort, and the purpose behind the schemes of the Mad Prince.

Of the Mad Prince and Torment, to be precise. The two Defiled horrors were partners in crime… in more than one sense. Even though Torment was barely a living being, from what Cassie had told him, her mind shattered and her will chained by the restrictions of her own creation and the authority of the Dread Lord.

In a sense… Sunny had been right. The Mad Prince had indeed a plan in place to remove Torment from the cohort's path. She had been used and discarded, sent to be slaughtered by Cassie in Fallen Grace. He did not doubt for a moment that the outcome of their fight had been calculated by the vile madman in advance.

The only thing he was not sure about was if Torment knew about it and went to her death willingly… or at least as much as she had been capable of exercising her broken will.

There were numerous questions on his mind, but two of them were the most important.

What was the message Torment had to deliver?

And why had Cassie not shared her knowledge with the cohort?

'The answer to the second question should be evident, by now.'

Whether Cassie intended to or not, she had let it slip. When she told him about the version of her from the previous cycle — the one that had eventually become Torment, turned into a Defiled abomination by the previous version of him — she said that the Cassie of the past had never intended to escape the Defilement.

That she had known what the future Mad Prince was planning, and allowed herself to be infected with the Defilement by him despite

that.

Which meant… that Cassie had been scheming long before that happened. That she had needed to be Defiled, for some reason. Before escaping Corruption come the next cycle.

He gritted his teeth.

"So… you knew all along, and kept quiet? You did not share any of that knowledge with us, acting surprised when we learned the dreadful truths of this Nightmare? Did you not think, at least once… that maybe it would be good for us to know what we were getting ourselves into, before plunging ourselves into the sea of danger and suffering?!"

Cassie faced him calmly.

"Why? Because sharing my knowledge has worked so well in the past? Sure, Sunny. You of all people should know how dangerous knowledge is, what knowing something that you aren't supposed to know can do, and what revealing secrets can destroy."

She turned away.

"What would have changed if I told you? We would have still needed to go to Aletheia's Island. We would have still needed to go to Twilight. Sure, we could have prepared better for what was waiting for us ahead… but I am not omniscient. I only know that much. Would it have made a difference?

Or would it have just made us complacent and arrogant, leading to our deaths?"

The blind girl smiled sadly.

"Most of all, would any of our preparations have been more thorough than what the Mad Prince and Torment had already prepared for us?"

She shook her head.

"So, I think I will keep my knowledge to myself. That way, at least, I won't be blamed for the decisions the rest of you make, when you

make them."

Sunny laughed bitterly and stared at her, his eyes full of dark amusement.

"Oh… now you decide to keep your knowledge to yourself. Good, good. It's just a pity that you couldn't do the same on the Forgotten Shore, before turning me into a damned slave!"

He had not planned to bring the distant past up, but hearing Cassie say those words, all of the resentment he had buried in his heart suddenly flooded to the surface.

Perhaps it was not unexpected, though. All this time, Sunny had hated the fact that he was made a slave by Nephis. Nephis had not used that power against him, so that hatred of his was more of an abstract thing, born from the fear of what could potentially happen.

Not that it made it invalid.

Recently, however, the situation had changed. The harm Shadow Bond was doing him had turned from abstract to very real. Its existence was the thing that stood between him and Nephis like an impregnable wall, making the idea of them having a future together seem beyond reach.

That was what Cassie had taken from him, as well.

Chapter-1557: Terrifying Existence

Cassie turned sharply and stared at him, her mask of composure barely holding.

"You… you know why I did what I did. I was young and naive, back then. Stupid, and helpless. I… know better now."

Sunny raised his hands and clapped them, applauding her.

"Good for you! Really. What stunning growth. But…"

He lingered for a few moments, and then said through gritted teeth:

"But, you know… you never even apologized for taking my freedom away. So, I guess, you aren't that burdened by having done that."

She flinched.

The cold winds rose, making the sails of the ketch flutter. Nevertheless, it stayed in place, its bow lodged into the icy shore of the desolate land.

Cassie remained silent for a while.

Then, she said, her voice trembling slightly:

"But... I did. I did apologize."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Somehow, I don't remember. And I would have remembered something like that. When did you ever apologize for what you had done to me?"

The blind girl hesitated for a few moments, and then said quietly:

"It was… right after we escaped from the Soul Devourer. When we were sailing across the dark sea on the boat Nephis made."

Stunned, Sunny stared at her for a few moments.

Then, his face was twisted by a grimace of anger.

"What? What the hell did you say? You apologized… in advance? Almost an entire year before we stormed the Crimson Spire? What kind of crap is that?! Does it make sense, in that twisted little head of yours?!"

Subjected to his anger, Cassie lowered her head.

Then, however, a cold expression appeared on her face.

She looked up, facing him again.

"Sure… yes, Sunny. You're right. That was cowardly of me."

A fragile smile appeared on her face.

"But what is the worth of saying sorry? It wouldn't have changed anything. Words are worthless. If someone is truly sorry, they should express it through their actions, don't you think?"

Sunny chuckled.

"And what have you done to redeem your mistake? Huh? What can you even do? It can't be undone!"

Cassie remained silent for a while, and then suddenly pierced him with a fierce gaze.

Even though he knew that she could not see, at that moment, Sunny did not remember it.

Her voice was a little hoarse when she spoke:

"...Says who?"

He was slightly taken aback. Glancing at her with a frown, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

Cassie smiled bitterly.

"Who says that it can't be undone? Who says that it's impossible?"

She shook her head.

"So what if it's impossible? I'll do it anyway."

Sunny stared at her in bewilderment.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Cassie raised her hands and rubbed her wrists, where the golden shackles had once been.

"What else? I am talking about breaking fate, Sunny. Wasn't that what you wanted to do, too? Wasn't that your entire goal, too? I wish to break fate, as well."

She lowered her head for a moment, then said quietly:

"Everything I've done… everything I've endured… it was all for this. For this moment. It's so impossibly hard, to break fate. No matter how fiercely you attack it, it strikes back with ten times the might. My True Name, Song of the Fallen… it means that I am destined to witness the fates of others, and carry the memories of them long after they are gone. To be a witness, powerless to change what I see.

Well… I refuse. I don't want a fate like that, at all."

Then, a faint smile bloomed on her delicate face.

"It is impossible to break fate with a strike, but what about a thousand strikes? Ten thousand strikes? If each one of them damages its tapestry a little bit, misaligns its strings by a tiny fraction, obstructs its flow by a miniscule amount… then, put together, they can tear fate apart. One just needs a sharp enough weapon."

Cassie faced Sunny, allowing him to look her in the eye.

"I… intend to give you a chance to become such a weapon, Sunny."

Suddenly, he felt a chill run down his spine.

The bad premonition he had felt was back, making him tense with fright.

"What… what did you do? What did you do, Cassie?"

She shrugged.

"What did I do? This and that. Some of it was easy, and some of it was hard. All of it, though… all of it was almost unbearable. Is unbearable. But not for long, now.

Because I'm about to be free of that burden."

Sunny stared at her, his eyes slowly widening.

Suddenly, he saw many of Cassie's actions in a new light.

And the implication of what he saw was so vast and terrifying that it made him shudder.

"You… you planned it all from the start… didn't you?"

She smiled softly, then shook her head.

"Not all of it. It's impossible to plan for all of it. I might know a lot, and see a lot, but I am not omniscient, Sunny. The trick, though, is to plan enough of it so that when the unexpected happens, it could still become a part of the plan."

He looked aside, distracted by the glow of the Guiding Light.

"You've been manipulating the events of this cycle all along. That time in the drowned temple… I failed to discover the hidden compartment where the sacred relic was hidden, so you did it for me. Wait… no!"

As Cassie looked at him with a faint smile, Sunny paled.

"It was… it started long before the Nightmare. During the battle where the seven Saints came together, you manipulated the battle formation… so that I could finish off the Defiled Seeker of Truth…"

He stopped talking as a shiver ran through his body.

"No… even before that…"

When had it started?

When had Cassie begin to weave her grandiose plan, manipulating everyone, from the Fire Keepers following her to the leaders of the Great Clans, into doing her bidding?

An powerful oracle… was indeed a terrifying existence.

Especially one as ambitious, but at the same time quiet and unnoticeable, as Cassie had turned out to be.

Finally, Sunny looked at her, utterly stunned.

His expression was frozen.

"It… it was…"

Even saying it aloud was difficult, each word immeasurably heavy because of the weight of all the implications.

"...It was back on the Chained Isles. When I came to you, intending to recruit you to challenge the Second Nightmare together. And you told me that you received a vision of us dying in the winter. You have already been planning for today, all the way back then."

Chapter-1558: First Thread

Sunny stared at Cassie, struggling to believe how deep the roots of her mysterious scheme went. He noted recently that the blind girl's personality changed drastically after the cruel words he had thrown at her at the underground level of the Academy's medical complex, right after the Forgotten Shore.

That was when she had begun to weave her spiderweb, most likely.

Looking at the young woman sitting across from him, meeting his gaze with dark and defiant pride, he felt a chill running down his spine.

'...Which one of us is worthy of being called the heir of Weaver, even?'

Cassie had just as high of an affinity to fate as him, after all, if not higher.

He took a deep breath, feeling stifled.

"Yes… it was back then. Looking back, it didn't make a lot of sense, did it? You had just been burned by blindly believing a vision of yours, to catastrophic results. And yet, you seemed to not question the validity of us dying come winter, even though that vision of yours could only be called vague, at best."

Cassie had seen the two of them falling into a bottomless abyss, surrounded by snow. She told Sunny that they would die in the winter… but, in the end, the events of that vision happened in November, when the Night Temple was destroyed in a terrible battle between Sky Tide and Saint Cormac.

"You already knew that it did not mean our deaths. And yet, you made me think otherwise. But… why?"

Cassie remained silent, but Sunny's eyes widened, a flash of frightening understanding illuminating his restless mind.

"It… it was because I was planning to challenge the Second Nightmare in the winter. But you needed me to move the plan forward, and aim to reach the Seed in the Ivory Tower by the end of autumn. What changed because I listened to your vision and adjusted the timing of the expedition?"

A dark, dangerous light ignited in the depths of his eyes. Sunny gasped.

"Because Saint Cormac… was away from the Night Temple until the end of autumn. Which meant that he wouldn't have been able to stop Mordret from escaping his cage!"

Cassie shifted slightly, continued to face him without saying anything. But she did not need to… once Sunny pulled on the thread, the tangled web of her hidden actions started to unravel itself. All he needed to do to understand all of it — or at least most of it — was to continue pulling.

Remembering the horrid agony the two of them endured in the Night Temple, side by side, Sunny shuddered and felt rage fuel his veins.

"You... knew about Mordret all along. You must have learned of his existence before he even learned of yours, when you were anchored at the Night Temple — even though neither you nor your cohort were allowed to enter the inner parts of the Citadel.

Later, you left for the Sanctuary and then went on an expedition to reclaim a sapling of the sacred tree… knowing that I would come to you, and carry the mirror shard that would allow that bastard to escape to the doorstep of his jail."

Sunny and Cassie had come very close to dying in the cage of the Valor's secretive Citadel. Knowing that she had expected the mad prince of the great clan to escape, and for them to be embroiled in the horror that followed his release, made it all seem even more disturbing.

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, stunned by the ruthlessness with which Cassie had treated herself. By then, he had already been an Awakened Demon, and armed with the power of his Divine Aspect, he had a much easier time surviving the imprisonment in the Night Temple.

She, however, did not possess multiple soul cores or an Aspect that could augment her endurance and resilience, so Cassie had suffered much more in that cage.

Shaking his head in stunned silence, he said quietly:

"You wanted Mordret to escape… why did you want him to be free?"

There were all kinds of answers to this question. The most obvious one was that Cassie had needed the cohort to enter the Second Nightmare sooner rather than later, and do it in the company of the Prince of Nothing, as well.

The very fact of his escape had put a crack in the potential relationship Sunny could have had with the great clan Valor… putting him in conflict with them at the moment when Nephis returned to the waking world.

Which, in turn, pushed her into accepting their terms and becoming an adopted daughter of Valor.

There were numerous other consequences of that single event Cassie had helped happen, spreading outward into the future. Mordret was a singular existence, so the fact that he was free to roam the two worlds had changed too much, from the events of the Second Nightmare to the conclusion of the war the great clans had waged in Antarctica.

Which of these events had been planned by Cassie? Which had been mere coincidences? Which were coincidences that she had nimbly incorporated into her grand design, adapting to the changing circumstances with stunning speed?

Just like she had perceived and calculated numerous futures with incredible speed while fighting the Defiled sybil in the drowned

temple.

It was impossible to tell.

Cassie's design was a bit like the tapestry of fate, which she claimed to wish to destroy. The details could change or be influenced by unforeseen circumstances, but these sudden twists were only minor disturbances in the flow she willed into existence. The currents changed, but the direction of the tide always remained the same, pulling everything it touched to an unchanging conclusion.

All Sunny could do was determine the points in time when Cassie had influenced the events openly, and try to glean her purpose from that.

He rose from his sit and walked to the bow of the ketch, unable to remain in place. His mind was too tumultuous for that.

'Incredible...'

Chapter-1559: Thousand Cuts

"Mordret, Mordret… you remained pretty passive in the Second Nightmare, didn't you? The only time you shared your knowledge of the future with me… was to tell me that he couldn't be allowed to enter the Ivory Tower."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then smiled crookedly:

"But then, what you really wanted to achieve was not preventing him from entering the Ivory Tower, was it? It was making sure that he entered the Ebony Tower instead, and collected whatever it was that Nether had left there. By telling me that one sentence, you achieved exactly that."

He felt as if the ground was disappearing from beneath his feet.

What had happened to Mordret in the Ebony Tower? The Prince of Nothing had not shared that information completely, but he did mention that after leaving it, he was much harder to find with the help of divination. The strange, vague symbols Sunny had seen on Mordret's soul core were the result of that.

Why would Cassie want the bastard to be resistant to her power? To make sure that Soul Stealer could go against Torment? Or simply to ensure that Valor would not be able to track their exile prince before the time was right? Or for something that would happen in the future?

What else? What else had Cassie done, subtly manipulating the events of the past years?

Was it a coincidence that the two of them had met Morgan at the Academy on the day that Nephis returned from her Second Nightmare? Surely, no. That was why Sunny had been there the moment she woke up, to welcome her back.

Nephis then spent a month living in his house, then announced her decision to join Valor at the ball… making him leave in anger and enlist for the Southern Campaign. Which was why he was present in the Antarctic Center during the battle against the Remnant of the Jade Queen, and received the Sin of Solace.

Later, Cassie helped him escape the endless tunnel by sending him toward the Heart of Darkness. She also manipulated the battle against the immense horde of Nightmare Creatures as Morgan's adviser, making sure that Sunny was in the right place, at the right time, to deal the final blow to the Fallen Titan, Defiled Seeker of Truth, and therefore received the Mirror of Truth from it.

Finally, she was there at the Battle of the Black Skull, without a doubt knowing what would happen. She was in the Nightmare Desert, as well, eventually entering the Nightmare of the Great River with the six other powerful Masters — Sunny, Nephis, Mordret, Kai, Effie, and Jet.

And these instances were only what Sunny could remember, and had experienced personally. There was no telling how many strings Cassie had really pulled from behind the curtain, how many people she had influenced, and how many coincidences she had engineered to arrange for everything to happen in accordance with her wishes.

The scale of the brilliant web she had woven was nothing short of astonishing... and terrifying.

Of course, it was impossible to say that she was solely responsible for how these events had happened. Fate flowed, pulling everyone with its current, after all… and even if the details were to change, Sunny was pretty sure that he would have ended up in Antarctica one way or another. Nephis would have probably ended up siding with Valor, one way or another.

The Chain of Nightmare would have happened no matter what Cassie could have done. Song and Valor would have clashed, hiding their war on the battlefields of the Southern Quadrant.

But that was precisely what Cassie was doing, wasn't it? Pulling on the strings of fate ever so minutely, compared to the grand scale of

the inconceivable tapestry, and pushing toward her goal through these insignificant changes.

One change had no meaning. Two changes had no weight, as well… but a thousand? Ten thousand? By altering the details of countless inevitable events ever so slightly, she was creating a chain reaction of changes, which grew like an avalanche, threatening to alter the entire flow of the river of fate… the flow that was supposed to be unchangeable.

Could it work?

Sunny was not sure.

He felt like some of the changes Cassie had caused were more important than others, though.

The Sin of Solace and the Mirror of Truth, these two Memories… somehow, he felt that they were the key to Cassie's intent.

There was no need to explain the significance of the Sin of Solace. That Memory, containing the whisper of the builder of the Tomb, was perhaps the most important piece at play here, in the Third Nightmare. It was responsible for creating the Mad Prince, after all… and therefore introducing a variable into the endlessly repeating cycles of the Great River.

A single variable that introduced utter chaos to the entire system.

The Mirror of Truth was also very significant. Not only because its runes described a conversation between Weaver and Ariel, but also because it was the sole instrument that could allow someone to replicate Neph's [Longing] Ability, thus making them immune to Corruption for a short period of time.

The First Seeker was a vast source of Corruption, which Aletheia had been plagued by after learning the truth of the Estuary. Sunny did not need to think long to understand how important the Mirror of Truth was.

Still… none of it really explained what exactly Cassie was planning, and what she meant by saying that Sunny could become a weapon to

destroy fate.

There were a million questions on his mind, but he threw them all away, looking at the beautiful young woman with a somber expression.

After a bit of silence, Sunny said hoarsely:

"You don't seem to be denying any of it."

Cassie shrugged.

"Why should I deny it?"

She faced him, then closed her eyes suddenly, letting out a long sigh.

"Honestly, it's a relief. I've been keeping it all to myself for too long, so… it's refreshing, to be able to share it with someone. To be witnessed by someone. Maybe it's selfish, but I… am glad that you finally figured it out, Sunny."

His face remained motionless.

'She's happy, huh…'

Well, he couldn't say that he did not understand. It felt nice, to be witnessed.

Still…

Sunny looked at Cassie with a dark expression and asked, his tone devoid of any emotion:

"Well then, tell me, Cassie… what is it that you want? How exactly are you planning to break fate? What is the answer?"

She lingered for a moment and then smiled faintly.

"Simple, really. It's…"

Cassie faced him and finished, her calm voice full of cold, confident determination:

"It's the Well of Wishes."

Chapter-1560: Freedom of Choice

"...The Well of Wishes."

Sunny stared at Cassie with an incredulous expression, struggling to understand what her words meant.

'What is she talking…'

Then, his face changed slightly, a hint of confusion and ridicule appearing in his eyes.

"The… the children's story? The fairy tale about a magical well that grants the most precious wish of anyone who reaches it? Are you… are you out of your mind?"

Sunny took a step back, barely avoiding falling out of the ketch. His mind was full of bewilderment and disbelief.

"Come… come on! You can't possibly be serious! You don't believe that it's true, do you?!"

That was the fairy tale Ananke had told him, not long before her death. Sunny remembered it well… but he had never expected to hear Cassie, someone so smart and pragmatic, put her hopes in a children's story about a magic well!

The blind seer, however, did not seem affected by his ridiculing tone. She faced Sunny calmly, her face somber.

After a while, Cassie gritted her teeth and said, her voice steady:

"It might not be true for anyone else. But it's true for you, Sunny. If you reach the Estuary… your wish to be free will come true. Free of

your bond, free to live your life the way you want. Free of fate itself."

She lingered for a moment, then rose to her feet, too, and walked closer, stopping a mere step away from him.

"But, Sunny… you can't have both. You can reach the Estuary from here, but once the Nightmare is over, your chance will be gone. The moment Nephis destroys the First Seeker, your chance would have slipped away."

She smiled bitterly and raised the Guiding Light, offering it to him.

"That was what you were truly angry about, wasn't it? That I took the choice away from you."

Cassie pushed the sacred relic into his hands and took a step back.

"Well, here it is. Instead of an empty apology. I am giving the choice back to you. You can leave and rush to the Estuary… the Guiding Light will show you the way through the mists of the Source, as long as you don't give another True Name to it. Once you reach the Estuary, use the Mirror of Truth and push to its heart. There… you will find your freedom."

She turned away, lingered for a moment, and then added in a quiet voice:

"But… I hope that you make a different choice. That you will stay with us, despite everything. Nephis, I, and the others… are we so terrible? Is it really that unbearable, to share a bond, if it's based on trust? I think you know by now that it's not.

What is unbearable is not having been given a choice about forming that bond, and now, even though the connection between you and her will remain the same… it will be there because you have chosen for it to exist. So… you decide. That right is yours, again."

Sunny stared at her silently, entirely shaken. His mind felt empty, as if all thoughts had been banished from it by this sudden revelation.

"No… no, wait a minute. What do you mean, it's true for me? I can get rid of Shadow Bond if I reach the Estuary? How? What is in there,

at its heart?"

Cassie frowned a little, then shook her head.

"I don't know, exactly. What I do know, without a shadow of a doubt, is that my words are true. If you reach the very heart of the Estuary before the Nightmare ends, you will become free from fate. You will be fateless. The strings that hold you like a puppet will set you free, and your connection to Nephis will be broken as a result. I saw it, and Torment saw it as well."

He frowned.

"P… preposterous! Plus, doesn't it sound exactly like what killed Nephis the last time? The Mad Prince, he… he was… he was obsessed with reaching the Estuary…"

Suddenly, his eyes widened. He thought he understood now why his versions from the previous cycles had all ended up entering the Source in search of the Estuary. If there was indeed a way to break free from the cruel grasp of fate that had been hidden at the heart of the black pyramid by the Demon of Dread…

Then Sunny, obsessed with regaining his freedom as he was, would have given his all to find it.

The actions performed by all his previous selves only served to give credence to what Cassie had said.

But that was also why Nephis had died in the cycle that birthed the Mad Prince.

The blind girl, however, shook her head.

"The Mad Prince had entered the Estuary in search of his freedom, but failed to resist the Defilement and became Corrupted instead. Thus, the endless cycles continued. This cycle, though, was engineered by Torment and him specifically to make sure that all members of the cohort survive.

Whether you find the Estuary or not, there are mere days left before Nephis storms Verge and kills the First Seeker. The end… is already

inevitable."

Sunny raised a trembling hand and rubbed his face, dazed.

"But… how can I leave? Verge, the First Seeker… won't the cohort need me for the battle? Torment is there, as well… no, wait… she's dead."

Without Torment, Verge had been left without a leader. The First Seeker was a harrowing force, but also a mindless one. It could not lead the creatures Corrupted by its touch… which was why Fallen Grace had not been destroyed in all these years, most likely.

The level of the threat presented by Verge was still immense, but with Neph's incorruptible soul, the most terrifying power of the First Seeker had already been rendered meaningless.

Cassie nodded.

"Sure… we can use having you at Verge. The battle will be perilous, without a doubt. It will be fierce and fearsome, far beyond anything that a mundane human can imagine. But we can also manage without you. We have the Memories you have created, after all. We have Aspect Legacies, experience battling the Defiled, and means to defend ourselves from the First Seeker.

We even have Mordret, who wields a Divine Aspect, just like you."

The blind girl sighed.

"So, Sunny… you must decide. I've given the choice back to you. Now, it's in your hands."

With that, she took a few steps and jumped out of the ketch, landing on the icy shore. The Echo of Torment dissolved into a whirlwind of sparks, leaving Sunny alone in the boat.

Cassie then turned and looked at him expectantly.

Her face was both scared and hopeful.

Sunny froze, not knowing what to do.

Chapter-1561: Treacherous Shadow

Sunny stood at the deck of Ananke's ketch, looking at Cassie, but not seeing anything. A storm of emotions, fragmented thoughts, and burning desires raged in him, making it hard to comprehend the true scope of what the choice presented to him was.

He took a deep breath.

At that moment, the Sin of Solace tried to distract him by saying something, but Sunny forcefully cut off the voice of the sword wraith, concentrating on the sound of waves breaking against the shore of the frozen wasteland instead.

'Calm down… let's think this through.'

So… Cassie, who had turned so quiet and unassuming to almost be invisible, had been burning with an insane ambition all along. Just like Sunny, who had swore to break the chains of fate that bound him, she had been pursuing the very same goal, as well.

Acting behind the curtains and armed with the revelations she received, the blind seer had been subtly manipulating the events of the past years to achieve that goal, suffering in silence as she stubbornly pushed toward it. All to give Sunny back the choice she had taken from him.

The extent of her machinations was both admirable and frightening, so vast and intricate as to almost be inconceivable.

But it was real. Cassie had indeed managed to create a moment where at least one of them — Sunny — had an opportunity to free himself from fate.

And that… was much more significant than one would think.

Sure, Sunny could fulfill his most ardent wish and win back his freedom, destroying the Shadow Bond, and even his [Fated] Attribute. Thus making it possible for him to live a life free of its shackles.

But what Cassie wanted to achieve went far beyond that.

What she wanted was to forge a weapon to resist fate. And that weapon… was a single variable.

Just as it had happened with the cycles of the Great River, which were thrown into utter chaos by the appearance of the Mad Prince, the tapestry of fate would become chaotic and unpredictable with the appearance of a fateless being. The entire flow of fate would change as a result of that.

Fateless… was a very suitable name for what Sunny could become, should he enter the Estuary and reach its innermost secret.

However…

While Cassie wanted to break fate, just like Sunny… in a contradictory fashion worthy of a human, she also wanted Sunny to refuse that chance and remain with her, Nephis, and the cohort. To choose them over his desire to be free.

And just like Cassie, Sunny wanted both of these things, as well.

Breaking fate was nice. Gaining his freedom was nice. Learning the secrets of the Tomb of Ariel was a cherry on top.

However… not abandoning his friends right before the decisive battle against the forces of the Defilement was also nice. Choosing to remain by the side of the people he cared about — and the person he loved — seemed just as precious.

So, what was he supposed to do?

Jet had once told him that there was no freedom in this world. That the only freedom there was was the freedom to choose his own

chains… and Sunny came to agree with her, over time.

By choosing to stay with the cohort, he would be choosing his own chains. In a sense, that would make him free, as well.

But, but…

Maybe there was no freedom in the waking world. Maybe there was no freedom in the Dream Realm, too.

But they were currently in the Tomb of Ariel, which contained an entire realm of its own. Who was to say that there was no freedom in this bizarre and senseless world, either?

Cassie surely seemed certain that she was telling the truth. And despite everything that had happened between them, Sunny was inclined to believe her.

He had been resentful of her for what she had done, and for failing to even say that she was sorry. But now he knew that instead of saying a few easy… or maybe not so easy… words, the blind girl had been silently striving to redeem her mistake, instead.

She was trying to repent by giving the choice she had taken from him back.

And now, she had managed to do just that.

If he wasn't satisfied even by such a show of sincerity, then what could he be satisfied with?

Granted… Cassie had gone about her redemption in an incredibly extreme and possibly misguided way. She also put him in a very tough situation.

Sure, the choice he had wished for so fiercely was now in his hands.

But what was he supposed to do with it?

'It's… true…'

One had to be careful of what they wished for.

Sunny stared at Cassie for a while, then lowered his gaze and looked at the Guiding Light, which she had pushed into his hands.

"This… was the message Torment had to deliver?"

The blind girl nodded slowly.

"Yes. It's easy to enter the Source. But it's almost impossible to find the entrance to the Estuary within the mist, unless you know the way. The Guiding Light is now showing the way to the Estuary. The message she delivered to me was the True Name that can make the relic of the sybils point to where you must go."

He hesitated.

"What is the True Name?"

The blind girl smiled helplessly.

"I don't know. Torment's power blocked that memory in my mind. The seal was only removed once we reached Verge. And after I used it to activate the Guiding Light, the memory of it was erased from my mind, as if it was never there."

She hesitated for a moment.

"No matter to whom or to what that True Name belongs to, it is incredibly powerful. Just bearing it for a few moments put a terrible strain on my mind and soul. So… if you do decide to leave us. Take care once you reach the Estuary."

Sunny remained motionless for a while.

He didn't want to abandon Nephis. Even if the cohort was more or less capable of taking Verge without his help… he simply did not want to.

But.

If he threw all the complicated thoughts about the nature of freedom and what it meant to be free in this world out of his mind, there were only three things left.

Sunny himself, Nephis, and the connection between them.

In the past, he had run away from her twice. Once in the Dark City, and once at the ball of the great clan Valor.

Sunny didn't wish to run away from Nephis for the third time.

However, he also knew that any kind of relationship between them — at least the current them — was impossible as long as Shadow Bond existed.

So, weirdly enough… by abandoning her on the shores of Verge, he would not be running away from Nephis. Instead, he would be moving towards her.

Because only by becoming free of her could Sunny be with her.

He took a deep breath, and then looked at Cassie.

At the same time, Sunny dismissed Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare, calling them back to his soul. All six of his shadows were already with him, wrapped tightly around his body.

And then, the shadows along the shore moved, extending forward and pushing the ketch back into the water.

'I'm sorry, everyone… I guess I am a treacherous bastard, after all.'

Sunny knew that Cassie had guided the ketch along the shore precisely to give him the opportunity to take it away. She would return to the Chain Breaker on foot, while he… he would be free to sail downstream, toward the Source.

Racing to reach the Estuary, and reclaim his freedom, before Nephis conquered the Nightmare.

Looking back, Sunny threw one last glance at the blind girl, who was standing forlornly on the icy shore, summoned a certain Memory, and shouted:

"Cassie!"

She turned, hearing the sound of his voice.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Let's do it!"

He clenched his fist and raised it into the air.

"Let's break fate!"

Chapter-1562: Leaving Without Saying Goodbye

The ketch flew on the currents of the Great River, circling the ice wasteland. Sunny did not have the enchanted staff to summon the wind, and he had not been able to master the sorcery of Names, like Nephis. But he had the Crown of Twilight, and with it, the water itself responded to him.

So, Sunny made the river itself push the ketch forward. A strong gale blew from the future, as well, and as soon as he skirted the desolate land, it filled the sails. His vessel gained speed as it rushed into the past.

Leaving Verge… and his friends… behind.

There was a storm of emotions in Sunny's heart.

Hope, excitement, anticipation…

But also guilt, fear, and shame.

What would Nephis and the other members of the cohort think when they came back and found out that he had abandoned them? How would Cassie explain his absence?

Would they be angry, shaken, and resentful of him? Would they feel betrayed?

They had the right to feel that way. He had abandoned them on the eve of a perilous battle, leaving to pursue a selfish goal. Was there a more obvious betrayal than that? Imagining the faces of his friends when they learned of his departure, Sunny felt his heart ache.

He broke the promise he had made after Ananke's death. He broke

the promise he had given to Wind Flower, as well. And even the promise he had given himself. That made his heart ache, too.

But… it didn't matter.

Even though he was in pain because of what he had done, he would have done it again. The reward that the Estuary promised… the freedom to live like he wanted to live, released from the suffocating hold fate had on him, was worth it.

It was worth it a hundred times over.

Removing the Shadow Bond alone was.

Sure, Sunny did not know how exactly his wish for freedom would be fulfilled in the Estuary. Perhaps someone like Mordret would call out his True Name, turning him into a slave once again.

That was alright. Sunny felt confident in his ability to kill an enemy who would become his master. It was being bonded to someone he loved, and thus could not eliminate, that was the problem. Being a slave to fate.

'Freedom, freedom…'

The word tasted sweet on his tongue.

And so, Sunny abandoned Nephis… and Cassie, and Kai, and Jet, and Effie with her newborn child. Praying for their safety, he sped away from Verge, toward the dawn of time.

He had to hurry.

The city of the Seekers lay as close to the Source as they had managed to build it, but there was still a considerable distance between the icy wasteland and the mist. More than that, this part of the Great River was possibly the most dangerous there was — just like the harrowing reaches of the far future, the dawn of time was where the most powerful abominations in the Tomb of Ariel prowled.

And even if he reached the Source, it would take Sunny some time to find the entrance to the Estuary. It would take time to reach its very

heart, as well.

He had to accomplish it before the First Seeker was destroyed, and the Nightmare collapsed.

How long would it take for Nephis to conquer Verge?

Knowing her, it wouldn't be long.

Steering the ketch, Sunny gritted his teeth.

'One day to return from the scouting mission — two, at most. One day to guide the cohort to Verge. They would remain there for a day or two, evaluating the situation inside the city. Then… then, the battle itself. Even if they have to fight through a legion of the Defiled to reach the First Seeker, it won't take long.'

Nephis had seven fully saturated cores, after all. She wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice six of them to obliterate Verge. Mordret was not far away from forming the Monster Core, which would allow him to create a Reflection — once that happened, his growth would accelerate exponentially, quickly turning him into a unstoppable fiend once again.

Effie, Jet, and Kai were a force to be reckoned with, as well.

It would have been different if Nephis did not possess an incorruptible soul — after all, even the Serpent King and his army had failed to take Verge — but since she did possess it, the Nightmare would be over soon.

It was a matter of days.

So, there was no time to waste.

The ketch sailed downstream, carried by the winds and currents. The Great River glowed with iridescent light, the world suffused with darkness. The silence was only broken by the sound of waves and the infuriating voice of the Sin of Solace, who seethed with hatred and whispered poison into Sunny's ear.

Sunny refused to answer, though.

In fact, after saying goodbye to Cassie, he had not made a single sound.

His eyes were aimed at the horizon, and his face was frozen with cold determination.

Soon, the seven suns rose from beneath the water. The darkness was banished, and the sky turned bright again. He let out an inaudible sigh, as the image of the countless slumbering butterflies disappeared from his mind.

As it was dawn, Sunny used the opportunity and summoned the shell of the onyx serpent. Hiding the ketch in his maw, he rushed forward as fast as he could — and the speed granted to him by the body of the sea serpent in the water was nothing short of stunning.

Keeping such an enormous shell manifested burned through a lot of essence, but the Crown of Twilight was supplying him with a nearly endless reserve of it. More than that, even the essence he had expended to accelerate the current was replenished.

The period of dawn did not last long, and the sky soon turned azure. But Sunny had covered a great distance in that short period of time.

Spitting the ketch on the water, he dismissed the shell and landed on the deck again, grabbing the steering oar.

His solitary journey continued…

He was moving downstream, further and further into the dawn of time.

Approaching the point where time had not existed yet — the Source.

And the Estuary hidden in its mist.

Chapter-1563: Terrors of the Past

Sunny raced to the Source, afraid of the passage of time.

It was ironic, really…

Before the fateful conversation with Cassie, he had been tense and concerned about how the cohort would survive the battle for Verge. Now, however, he was concerned that they would destroy it too soon.

He had been worried for Nephis, but now, he was wary of her.

Changing Star seemed like something almost inevitable, now that his fate — or lack thereof — depended on how fierce and unrelenting her assault on the monstrous First Seeker would be.

Human mind was funny that way. It was colored by what one desired, making the same thing appear entirely different depending on the circumstances.

And so… Sunny needed to hurry.

He guided the ketch, pushing the currents forward with the help of the Crown of Twilight. The graceful boat seemed to be gliding on the water, moving with incredible speed. The shore of Verge had long disappeared from view, and there was nothing in front of him except for the vast expanse of the Great River.

The air itself felt different here, at the dawn of time. The waters were treacherous and full of peril. Now that Cassie wasn't with him, Sunny had no way of knowing where danger lurked. So, he remained as alert as possible, extending his shadow sense as far as he could.

That caution saved his life on more than one occasion.

The far reaches of the past, which corresponded to the very dawn of the Age of Gods, were not only full of bizarre and lethal hazards, but also of all kinds of harrowing Nightmare Creatures.

This span of the Great River was just as dangerous as the far reaches of the future, where Sunny had faced the Azure Serpent, the Black Turtle, the Dark Butterfly, and the countless other abominations that had almost feasted on his flesh.

There were Great Nightmare Creatures here, too, each of them vastly more powerful than Sunny was, despite all his growth. Most of them were faster than him, as well, and possessed senses that reached much further than his.

So, Sunny was in constant danger. He couldn't even outrun these abominable monstrosities… but, luckily, there was one thing at which he was superior to most, if not all of them.

It was flexibility, and being able to adapt to almost any situation.

When some inconceivable being rose from the depths to pull him under the water and devour him, Sunny summoned the shadows and turned into a giant butterfly, carrying the ketch with his six long legs.

When a terrifying abomination descended from the sky, he turned into the onyx serpent, hid the ketch in his maw, and sought safety in the depths.

There were other forms he could shape himself into, as well, each helpful in its own way. Of course, maintaining the shell cost him a lot of essence, so, afraid to drain his reserves of it, Sunny mostly remained in the ketch, guiding it away from potential perils by hand.

Still, on that first day alone, he almost lost his life a few times.

There was a moment when the water under him suddenly boiled and moved at incredible speed, threatening to overturn the boat. Sunny instantly summoned Saint, using her weight to balance the ketch, but that was merely the start of the disaster.

An enormous span of the Great River, as far as the eye could see, instantly turned into a furious vortex. The speed of the current was so

terrible that the hull of the ketch almost splintered, bombarded by powerful waves. It was pulled sideways, sliding deeper and deeper into the whirlpool.

Desperate to save himself and his vessel, Sunny opened the gate of the Shadow Lantern and called upon the shadows, forming the shell of the Dark Butterfly. His vast wings moved, throwing him into the air. His six legs grabbed onto the ketch, lifting it from the raging water.

Luckily, he was fast enough.

As Sunny rose high into the air, he was able to observe the cause of the catastrophic turbulence that had turned the current of the Great River into a death trap. When he did, his very soul shuddered.

There was a colossal, inconceivable maw hidden beneath the waves, stretching from one horizon to another. The terrible whirlpool that had almost shattered the ketch was caused by these titanic jaws opening and sucking in an immense plain of water.

An entire span of the Great River disappeared into the harrowing maw of the underwater colossus, whose body mercifully remained unseen.

…Sunny fled into the sky, never looking back.

At another time, he noticed the air far in the distance trembling, as if from heat. However, as Sunny drew closer, unable to avoid the strange area, he realized that there was no heat. The air was not trembling, either.

Instead, there were fissures in the fabric of space itself above the current, hidden in the sunlight and almost invisible. If not for his intuition ringing alarms, Sunny might not have noticed the hidden fractures in the world at all.

When he did notice them, however, and tried to glimpse what was hidden in the folds between the broken pieces of space, he saw millions of dark eyes looking back at him, full of hunger.

The current was pulling the ketch right into the area of the River

plagued by the fractured space.

Horrified, Sunny assumed the form of the onyx serpent and dove into the depths, hoping to hide from the gaze of the hungry abyss that hid in the fissures. However, the space was broken beneath the waves, as well.

Only there were no eyes there. Instead, hidden in the shattered space, there were countless corpses of dreadful Nightmare Creatures, all broken, twisted, and partially devoured.

Diving deeper and deeper into the darkness, until the pressure was crushing enough to almost destroy the mighty shell of the sea serpent, Sunny escaped that horror, as well.

But there were many more to come.

Chapter-1564: Returning to the Source

Some time later, Sunny saw thin lines moving in the air. Drawing closer, he saw something that resembled spiderwebs blowing in the wind, frayed and torn.

The only thing was that each string of the ghostly spiderweb was many kilometers long, and there were numerous such strings, moving between the sky and the surface of the Great River like tattered sails.

Some of them were white, but as Sunny guided the ketch between the billowing strings, he started to encounter more and more of them that were bright red. Eventually, it was as though he was traveling through a forest of red threads.

Navigating between them was not easy, but he was reluctant to come close to any of the strings, or allow the wind to bring any of them closer.

Eventually, Sunny witnessed something else. Out there in front of him, far in the distance, an immense depth dweller was weakly struggling against the current, its body enveloped by several dozen of the white spiderwebs. The creature's carapace seemed impregnable, but the strange strings did not seem to care. They simply grew through it, penetrating the leviathan's body.

As they did, their color slowly started to change from white to red, the redness spreading from the point of contact with the abomination's flesh along the length of the strings.

Blood. They were drinking the leviathan's blood.

Turning pale, Sunny gazed at the forest of vibrant red strings that surrounded him, stretching far into the sky, permeating a whole

region. His fingers turned white on the steering oar of the ketch.

He escaped that horror, as well.

And many more like it, although not unscathed.

Sometimes, Sunny had no choice but to fight, unleashing the full fury of the onyx serpent or his other shapes on the creatures that wanted to consume him. Some of them, he managed to kill… but most of them, he simply escaped after delivering several painful wounds.

By the end of the day, Sunny was bloodied and exhausted. His essence was on the verge of running dry, too.

But then the dusk came, and the Crown of Twilight replenished his dwindling reserves.

After dusk came the night, though, and it was more beautiful, and more harrowing, than any other night Sunny had experienced in the Tomb of Ariel.

By the end of it, he was barely alive.

But he was alive, nevertheless.

Sunny did not allow his blood to flow, and his bones refused to break. Even his soul, which had received a few deep wounds when he used Shadow Incarnation to form his shells, was potent enough to withstand the damage without falling apart.

Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare were beaten and battered, but alive, as well.

The ketch too survived. Even though there were new scars on its hull, one of its masts had cracked, its sails sporting signs of hasty repairs, Ananke's boat was still in one piece.

Throughout all of this, Sunny had not said a single word, and had not even allowed himself a single groan.

Pain was his old friend. He could withstand much more than that.

'Well… maybe not that much more.'

He was exhausted, both physically and mentally.

If there was one good thing about the horrors of the dawn of time, though, it was that the necessity to constantly be alert and on edge made it completely impossible for him to consider the consequences of what he had done… the fallout of breaking his promises, abandoning his friends, and leaving for the Estuary instead of fighting side by side with them in Verge.

'I wonder what they are doing, now...'

The scouting teams must have returned, by now. Nephis and the others had already learned of his absence. They must have even had enough time to digest it, to a degree, albeit not come to terms with it.

They were most probably advancing toward Verge.

…Which meant that he did not have a lot of time left.

'Where is it? Where is it?'

He was trying to calculate how far he had traveled from the Defiled city, and how that distance translated to what they had seen from the black void. From up there, it almost seemed as though the wisps of mist shrouding the Source touched the walls of Verge.

But from the surface of the Great River, the distance between the two was nothing short of vast.

Still… Sunny had been moving fast, both aboard the ketch and when summoning his shells.

By all accounts, he had to be getting close.

He glanced at the Guiding Light, which pointed directly forward, and summoned what little was left of his patience.

Finally, the night was over.

The seven suns rose from beyond the horizon once again, chasing

away the darkness. The waters of the Great River grew dim. A soft twilight enveloped the world, and with it, a flood of essence poured into Sunny's soul.

He let out a relieved sigh, summoned the Dying Wish, and used what little charges were left in the charm to heal the most dire of his wounds.

It was then that he saw it…

A wisp of mist drifted past him, disappearing into the gloom of twilight.

Feeling his heart skip a beat, Sunny spun and looked forward, trying to see what was hiding beyond the horizon.

The horizon… was hazy. It also seemed to be drawing nearer with each moment.

'This is it!'

Both relieved and excited, Sunny called upon the waters of the Great River, making the current run faster. The ketch flew forward, drawing closer and closer to the wall of mist.

Soon, it was surrounded by tendrils of thick fog. They flowed past the ketch, drifting above the waves. In front of him, the world turned somber and gloomy, rare rays of sunlight breaking through the veil of mist.

Then, the mist obscured the sky entirely, making it seem as though nothing else existed in the world.

Sunny found himself in familiar surroundings.

After nearly a year of wandering the dreadful expanse of the Tomb of Ariel…

He had finally returned to the Source.

Chapter-1565: Traversing the Mist

Ananke's ketch was floating through a world of mist. The thick fog surrounded it from all sides, suffused with somber twilight. All sounds seemed both muffled and exaggerated, echoing across the vast expanse of shrouded water. Sunny could not see very far. Even his shadow sense was dulled by the mystical mist.

It was a familiar sight.

'Indeed… I've been here already.'

This was the exact same place where Sunny had found himself at the start of the Nightmare.

The Source.

Here, covered by mist, the Great River flowed into itself, and the past turned into the future. He could not feel the current anymore, but it was still there, strangely jumbled and disjointed. The ketch was moving, yet Sunny could not tell in what direction it was being carried.

If he allowed himself to be pulled by the invisible current and reached the edges of the Source… he would be sent back to the day he had entered the Tomb of Ariel, as well as to the point upstream where the person whose role he took had been at that time.

'No… I can't allow that to happen.'

Sunny did not know if he could endure another cycle of the Great River. Much more importantly, the Six Plagues — and the Mad Prince — had broken the rules of time, somehow, and invaded a cycle they were not meant to exist in.

He did not know if their existence had become a part of the Great River by now, or if their heretical presence would be erased should a new cycle start. If it was the latter, then all the effort the Mad Prince and Torment had put into ensuring that all members of the cohort survived until the end of the Nightmare would be for naught.

More than that… that end was so close. Nephis would be reaching Verge soon, armed with the means of destroying the First Seeker. Sunny desperately did not want to live through the horrors of the Tomb of Ariel one more time, especially since the result would be hanging in a fragile balance.

No, he could not allow himself to get lost in the mist and miss his opportunity to enter the Estuary.

Because there, at the heart of the great pyramid, lay the key to his shackles. His chance to gain freedom.

Luckily, Cassie had made sure that he would have everything he needed to accomplish that goal.

He had the Guiding Light to lead him to the entrance of the Estuary. He had the Mirror of Truth to resist the Defilement once he entered it.

And he had the Sin of Solace, which had made it all possible.

Speaking of the sword wraith, as soon as the mist surrounded him, the bastard had disappeared somewhere. He must not have been in the mood to talk, or simply unable to manifest within the Source. Either way, Sunny did not miss the company of the loathsome apparition at all.

'Stay away for as long as you want…'

Picking up the Guiding Light, Sunny studied the radiant crystal that was supposed to show him the way.

Its light was behaving… strangely.

It pointed in a certain direction, but after a few minutes of sailing through the mist, the light would suddenly change, pointing in an

entirely different direction. That repeated over and over again, with the radiance of the sacred relic jumping around and shifting chaotically.

It was as though the entrance to the Estuary was constantly moving.

'No… it's not moving. I am.'

Sunny knew that it was true. The Estuary was stationary, but space itself was unreliable in the Source. It was Sunny who was being thrown around without any order, moving a few meters to one side only to find himself several kilometers to the other.

It was no wonder that the Seekers of Truth, despite all their might and knowledge, had failed to discover the Estuary before Aletheia of the Nine showed up.

The mysterious sorceress had even constructed her island in the image of the Great River, going so far as to create her own time loop, and her own sea of mist. Had it all been in order to learn how to navigate the Source?

Sunny did not know, but he suspected that she had not succeeded in finding the Estuary by accident.

How tragic it was, then, that all Aletheia had found there was her own doom… unless that was exactly what she had been searching for, of course.

Who knew what goals the Nine had pursued?

In any case, Sunny was not someone capable of raising a flying island in the middle of a mystical whirlpool and taming the time to make it flow endlessly in a circle. Therefore, he would have never been able to find the Estuary without the Guiding Light.

Was it how he had found it the first time, as well? Or had his versions from the previous cycles come up with their own solutions?

There was no point in guessing. Using the sacred relic of the sybils to illuminate the way, Sunny allowed the ketch to sail forward, moving the steering oar in accordance with where the radiance was pointing.

There were no Nightmare Creatures in the Source, no danger… except for the danger that the Source itself presented. So, traveling through the somber mist almost felt peaceful.

Sunny quickly lost his perception of time, so he did not even know how long he had been traversing the fog. It could have been an hour, a day, or an eternity… well, maybe not an eternity. Nephis would have obliterated the First Seeker long before that.

Still, he had to be getting closer.

'I wonder what Aletheia found in the Estuary.'

He wondered what the Mad Prince had found there, as well.

What secrets had Ariel hidden in the heart of his pyramid? What was the hideous truth he couldn't bear? Why had he hidden it all the way before time, away from the gazes of the gods?

One way or another, Sunny was going to find out. And break the chains of fate that bound him tightly in the process.

Just as he had always wished.

He was growing tired of the dancing radiance of the Guiding Light. His hand was growing numb as it held the steering oar of Ananke's ketch. Time… was flowing.

And then, finally, Sunny felt it.

The same thing he had felt before being expelled from the Source the first time.

He thought that he saw two tall pillars protruding from the mist far ahead, and then, the invisible current suddenly turned violent and turbulent.

There was the sound of roaring water, similar to what the waterfalls of the Edge sounded like, and he felt the ketch being pulled forward at incredible speed.

Then, there was a sense of weightlessness.

And then, only darkness remained.

Chapter-1566: The Estuary

There was the sound of wind whistling in Sunny's ears.

He was falling.

Flying through a sea of darkness, lost and disoriented, unsure of where he was.

'The… Estuary…'

The wind howled louder, and Sunny felt his body plummeting through it at terrible speed.

Belatedly, he remembered the need to summon the Dark Wing and slow down his fall.

Or summon the shadows and turn himself into a monstrous butterfly.

Or even a crow…

But it was too late for that.

Dazed, he caught a glimpse of an enormous black edifice swiftly approaching him from the darkness. It was like a rough, irregularly shaped, giant sphere of black stone that hovered in the void, eternal and indestructible. Strange mountains rose from its surface, hollow on the inside…

It looked like a giant stone heart.

Perhaps it was.

A moment later, Sunny saw Ananke's ketch collide against the surface of the sphere below him and shatter, fragments of wood flying to all sides.

There was no time to slow down his fall.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny looked at the swiftly approaching surface of the black stone. The moment his body would have been broken against it, he activated Shadow Step and dove into the shadows, instead, submerging deep into their dark embrace.

Hidden there, safe, he remained motionless for a while.

'I… made it?'

Sunny tried to calm down his feverish mind and moved up, returning to the surface.

Emerging from the shadows, he stepped on the surface of the weathered stone and instantly fell, feeling gravity pulling him down.

He was on a steep slope.

Sunny slid down that slope, surrounded by the fragments of broken wood. Despite the sharp rocks tearing at his skin, he did not allow himself to cry out in pain. Instead, he gritted his teeth, wrapped the surrounding shadows around his hand, and turned it into the clawed hand of a shadowspawn.

Twisting, Sunny struck the slope with his claws. They failed to penetrate the rugged black surface, sending sparks flying into the air — however, the friction alone slowed him down.

Eventually, Sunny came to a halt at the very edge of an abyssal drop, his feet dangling above an empty black void. The pieces of Ananke's ketch spilled into that void, disappearing in the darkness.

He remained laying for a few moments, catching his breath, then tried to assess his surroundings.

There was no light in the world. He was surrounded by darkness, with only the weathered surface of black stone separating him from the abyss. The sound of roaring water came from somewhere far, far below, turning into a barely audible whisper.

It came from above him, too, and from all sides.

The whispers assaulted his mind, making him dizzy.

Sunny grimaced, then cautiously stood up, struggling to keep his balance on the steep slope. Finally, he looked around.

'So… this is the Estuary.'

The Estuary was supposed to be located in a place that existed before time, and therefore before the gods had been born. So… that place was supposed to be the Void.

But either the Spell was unable to replicate the true Void, or unwilling to. Perhaps the Estuary was isolated from it, somehow. In any case, all Sunny could see was darkness and the surface of the vast sphere of black stone under his feet.

His expression was somber.

'No time to waste.'

Leaning forward, he arduously climbed back up the slope, eventually reaching its middle point — that was where he had first fallen. Without stopping to rest, Sunny continued to climb.

'Cassie said… that I need to get to the very heart of the Estuary. This means that I probably need to somehow climb inside the sphere.'

Remembering the strange hollow mountains, which resembled torn aortae, he continued to ascend the slope.

Eventually, Sunny crested the top of what seemed like a tall hill, and looked down.

He froze, shaken by what he saw.

His eyes widened, full of shock and fear.

'N—no… how can this be?'

In front of him, nestled between several immense outcroppings of black stone, was a vast valley. And on the floor of that valley, shrouded by darkness… lay the remains of countless broken ships.

It was a vast ship graveyard.

The harrowing thing about it, though, was that each of these ships looked familiar.

They were all the Chain Breaker.

There, in front of him, thousands of Chain Breaker lay on the black stone, broken and destroyed. Although each was destroyed in a unique manner, shattered by a terrible impact, most of them were exactly the same. Some were a little different, seemingly modified before turning into a forlorn wreck.

The shape of their rams was slightly different. The tattered sails were painted in different colors. The trees growing around the central mast of these ships were dead and twisted, devoid of all life.

Some of the trees, though, looked perfectly healthy and alluring, countless succulent fruits weighing their branches down.

Shuddering, Sunny decided to keep as far away from those wrecks as possible.

There were countless broken ships in front of him — thousands of them.

And it was just in that one valley.

They weren't the wrecks of an entire fleet of similar vessels. Instead, they were the same vessel, destroyed countless times.

Suddenly covered in cold sweat, Sunny felt his sense of reality shaking.

'What… what does it mean?'

He shuddered, then began to descend into the valley. As he did, he noticed more wood fragments among the shattered ships.

They were all the remains of Ananke's ketch, piled in tall hills. He just… he did not understand.

'How is this possible?'

As Sunny felt unsure of his sanity, a derisive laughter suddenly resounded from behind him.

Turning swiftly, he looked into the darkness with wide eyes.

But it was just the Sin of Solace.

The sword wraith… looked more substantial, somehow. Walking out of the darkness, he looked at Sunny with contempt and smiled viciously:

"What? Did you think that you were the first one to make it this far? Did you think that this is the first time you betrayed your cohort and decided to seek freedom in the Estuary, instead?"

The apparition scoffed and looked at the ship graveyard, his dark eyes burning with strange glee.

"Fool. There were countless versions of you that had come this far. Betrayal after betrayal, repeated endlessly in countless cycles... truly, your treachery knows no bounds."

Chapter-1567: One Last Time

Sunny remained silent, watching the Sin of Solace with a somber expression.

'Well… that much is obvious.'

Of course, he was not the first version of himself to reach the Estuary. There had been the Mad Prince, as well…

However, the next words of the sword wraith made him flinch:

"Oh, there were numerous Mad Princes before, too. All making schemes and striving to change something that could not be changed, the despicable bastards. Paving the way for their lesser versions… like you… to make it to the end. Each cycle a little different, but ultimately the same."

The apparition took a step forward and spat, his voice trembling with hatred:

"Gods… I'm so tired of this boring play. Each time you escape the Defilement, you are given the choice of remaining with your allies. And each time, you choose to betray them. You… you really are a piece of scum, you know that? Do you know how many times you've broken your promises? How many times you've betrayed Changing Star in the name of seeking freedom?"

The Sin of Solace laughed and gestured to the sea of broken ships.

"Look! Look, Lost from Light! Each of these wrecks is a monument to your sins."

Sunny remained silent as he looked at the broken ships, feeling a bitter emotion rise in his heart.

It was a tough pill to swallow… to be disappointed in himself.

But then, he smiled darkly.

Sure, knowing that he was an unreliable and treacherous, selfish person was bitter. But did it matter, really? He still did not regret his choice.

More than that… he was still going to see it through.

So what if all his previous selves had failed? They weren't him. He was the latest, and therefore the strongest. He wielded the accumulated legacy of all who came before, granted to him by the Mad Prince — the latest Mad Prince there had been — who remembered all the previous cycles through the Sin of Solace.

They might have failed, but Sunny was not going to. He didn't have to be the first... he simply needed to be the last.

It was impossible for him to fail.

Because the Nightmare was already ending.

By now, Nephis must have already begun her assault on Verge. The Mad Prince, Torment, and Cassie… they had manipulate the events to make sure that the Nightmare was conquered, whether with or without Sunny.

So, this cycle would be the last one… whether he achieved his goal or not.

And he was going to achieve it.

The Sin of Solace looked at him with disdain.

"What? You have nothing to say? Has the fear stolen your ability to speak?"

Sunny smiled crookedly and walked past him without saying a word.

He entered the ship graveyard and moved through it, making sure to stay away from the wrecks where the sacred trees were healthy and

brimming with fruit. The feeling he received from these ones was too similar, if much weaker, than what he had felt under the branches of the Soul Devourer.

Peace. Safety. Happiness. Content.

Therefore, Sunny moved as far away from that feeling as he could.

The Sin of Solae followed, falling silent. The wraith's expression was full of hatred and contempt.

Sunny paid him no attention.

It did not take him a lot of time to travel past the ship graveyard. Beyond it was another slope, this one leading to the peak of a high mountain. If the sphere of black stone had been the Unholy Titan's heart once… then the mountain would be one of the arteries.

Augmented by six shadows, Sunny's body was brimming with strength. Even though he was exhausted after the harrowing journey to the Source, he climbed the mountains without ever slowing down.

The only thing he felt nervous about was not making it to the goal in time.

Finally, Sunny reached the peak of the mountain. It was indeed hollow inside. In front of him was the entrance to a vast circular tunnel, surrounded by tall pillars. There were stone steps leading up to the maw of the tunnel, clearly man-made…

Or rather, daemon-made. Ariel must have shaped this entrance himself, a long time ago.

Walking closer to the steps, Sunny noticed that several of them had cracked over the ages. Jagged pieces of black stone were laying on the ground… the size and shape of them were eerily familiar.

They looked exactly like the jagged black rock the Key of the Estuary had been created from.

Sunny smiled.

'So this is where the Mad Prince picked the base material for his Memory up.'

Which meant that the vile madman had been to the Estuary before crossing from the future into the past. He could have gained his freedom a long time ago.

…But was there a point in being free if it was at the cost of Neph's life? For the Mad Prince, it was not.

That was why he had returned to the Great River without breaking the chains of fate. And that was why he had scratched numerous demented runes into the piece of flotsam drifting in the mist of the Source, all saying the same thing…

Be careful of what you wish for

The Mad Prince had regretted finding the Well of Wishes.

Sunny, however, would not.

Taking a deep breath, he summoned the Mirror of Truth and looked at its polished surface.

There, a reflection of Nephis was caught, looking just like she had on the carapace of the Black Turtle. Sunny had not used the Mirror during the last revolution of the Aletheia's Island's loop, and so, it was in pristine condition.

He looked at Neph's reflection for a while, then held the heavy mirror tightly and stepped into the grandiose tunnel, walking into its darkness.

Entering the heart of the Tomb of Ariel.

He walked forward for a while, not seeing anything particular. He couldn't even determine the direction in which the tunnel led… its floor was supposed to be sloping downward, but it felt flat, stretching endlessly forward.

Slowly, the walls of the tunnel expanded, and its ceiling disappeared from view. Sunny found himself walking between two perfectly flat

plains of black stone, surrounded by darkness.

And there, in the darkness… harrowing runes were carved into the stone, dancing madly.

As soon as Sunny caught sight of these runes, he immediately activated the enchantment of the Mirror of Truth.

Chapter-1568: Knowledge of the Void

Sunny had only caught a glimpse of the runes, but it was enough to send him into a state of utter terror.

Before even having time to think, he shut his eyes tightly and activated the enchantment of the Mirror of Truth, borrowing Neph's [Longing] Ability.

Thus making his soul incorruptible… for a while.

And it was just in time, because simply being close to the runes threatened to make Corruption bloom in his soul.

'Argh…'

He groaned mentally while keeping his mouth shut.

The pain was almost unbearable.

It was a familiar kind of terror, revulsion, and pain, as well.

Because Sunny had recognized the shape of those runes.

There were two types of runes that the Spell refused to translate.

One had to do with the type of beings it simply called the -unknown- — the primordial beings of the eternal, everchanging Void. The other had to do with the singular being that it similarly called the -unknown- — the mysterious progenitor of the seven daemons, which might have been one of the Void Creatures, or might not have been.

The latter runes were hard to look at, causing the head of the person to split with ache, and their mind to become dizzy.

It were the former runes, though, that were truly sinister, making the unfortunate person witnessing them feel terror and revulsion.

Inscribed on the walls of the tunnel were such runes… a great number of them. The walls of the tunnel, which seemed to stretch infinitely in all directions, were littered with them, with barely any empty spaces left between the harrowing symbols.

Sunny gulped for air.

'This… this is the source of the Defilement.'

Now that he thought about it, it made sense.

The dreadful runes described the Void Beings. And he had learned by now that Corruption was the influence of the Void, seeping through the walls of existence that caged it. Therefore, knowledge of the Void… was the source of Corruption, as well.

And that was what Ariel, that madman, had inscribed on the walls of the Estuary. The stories of the Void, the knowledge about it… and the True Names of the harrowing beings that dwelled within its everchanging depths, imprisoned by the gods.

He was sure of it.

That was what Aletheia had found, most likely, and what had turned her into the source of the Defilement… which was merely knowledge that could be shared and transferred, thus turning this form of Corruption into an unstoppable infection.

Knowledge of the Void, and of the True Names of those beings whose names could not be known, let alone uttered aloud.

That was why the Spell refused to translate the harrowing runes — not because it wanted to keep its secrets for itself, but simply because being able to read them would be the end of anyone who did.

Not just reading, as well… merely being in the presence of these runes was harmful. It was already painful and dangerous to glimpse a few of them, as Sunny had done a few times in his life — for example, when reading the descriptions of the drop of Shadow God's

blood and the drop of Weaver's blood.

If the Spell had translated those runes for him, those descriptions would have probably gone something like that:

[Before, there was only boundless, eternal void. From that dark abyss, the Creatures of the Void were born. Just like chaos itself, they were endless and everlasting, vast and forever changing…]

Or:

[The loathsome Thieving Bird was hated both by the gods and the creatures of chaos. However, it only cared about shiny things. Enamored by Weaver's beautiful eyes, it stole one of them on a dark, starless night. Impatient, the vile creature looked at its bounty while still in flight.

However, when it saw the reflection of the Void forever frozen in the depths of Weaver's pupil, it went mad and screamed, dropping the eye on the mortal realm below. All that was left in its greedy beak was one drop of pure, golden ichor.]

Witnessing those few runes, which merely named the Void and the type of beings born from it, had almost made him faint.

Here in the Estuary, though…

There were numerous ghastly runes carved into the stone, not only mentioning the Void and the Chaos Beings, but also describing them in detail and calling them by their True Names.

Therefore… even though Sunny had only caught a glimpse of the runes, unable to read them, that alone put him at risk of becoming Corrupted.

Remaining near them, in the endless tunnel, was going to make seeds of Corruption bloom in his soul, as well. So, if he remained here at the time the Mirror of Truth crumbled into dust… he would become Defiled.

He would become the Mad Prince again.

Running his fingers over the surface of the enchanted mirror, he could already feel a few thin cracks in it.

For a moment, Sunny considered turning around.

But then, a mocking voice came from the darkness:

"Why don't you open your eyes?"

Hearing the Sin of Solace made him remember why was it that he had come to the Estuary, and what was at stake.

His freedom.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny suppressed the terror and the agony he felt from being close to the harrowing runes and took a step forward.

Then, he took another step.

And then, another.

Even though each of them was so hard that he wanted to fall and shriek in pain, he remained silent and persisted.

Three steps turned into three dozen, and then into three hundred.

Sunny continued to walk through the dark tunnel, keeping his eyes closed. His shadows were wrapped tightly around his body, unable to see anything. Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare were kept safely within his soul, unable to witness the dreadful secrets of the Void.

Enduring the nauseating fear and torturous pain, he kept going.

And hoping…

That he would reach the end of the tunnel before the Mirror of Truth reached its limit.

Chapter-1569: Cracking Mirror

'Ah… I am… starting to rethink the value of curiosity…'

Even subjected to the horror of the knowledge of the Void, which could quite literally turn Sunny into a Nightmare Creature, he still felt a strange impulse to open his eyes and try to glean the secrets left in the Estuary by the Demon of Dread.

It was such a tantalizing mystery, after all. The Void, the ineffable beings that dwelled in it, and how the gods were born from them… only to wage war on the very existence that had given shape to their divinity.

It was a bit like the compulsion to jump that some people felt while standing near the edge of a tall cliff.

Of course, taking that leap would mean the death of them.

And opening his eyes would mean the end of Sunny.

So, he kept them shut and kept walking.

At first, each step felt as if he was trying to move a mountain. But slowly, torturously, he grew accustomed to the suffocating pressure of the ghastly runes. Not to the point of being comfortable around them, but at least enough so to increase his pace.

The reason he could make even a single step, though, was the Mirror of Truth — and the reflection of Nephis caught in it.

Without borrowing her [Longing] Ability, Sunny would have collapsed to the ground the moment the runes surrounded him, turning into a pile of… something. Tentacles, maybe, or bone blades.

Then again, the Mad Prince had looked pretty human-like. So,

perhaps, he would have retained his general appearance, with only his soul becoming consumed by Corruption.

That would have made Sunny a Fallen Terror, which was the same Rank and Class that the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore had possessed. The comparison made him feel not exactly nostalgic, but definitely contemplative.

'Things have changed a lot, haven't they?'

Distracting himself from the horror that surrounded him, Sunny continued to walk forward. Dread, absolute dread… what else had he expected to find in the heart of the Tomb of Ariel?

And it was not even the real thing. Sunny shuddered to imagine how much more harrowing the true Estuary was. What madman would want to try entering its dreadful halls?

And, somehow… the key to his freedom was still waiting for him, somewhere ahead. What could grant him freedom in this godforsaken place?

Sunny did not know, but he was determined to grasp it with both hands.

The Sin of Solace kept quiet, and so did he. Time passed agonizingly slowly but also inconceivably fast… in fact, Sunny had lost all sense of the passage of time the moment he entered the Source, so he had no idea how much of it was flowing by.

Nephis was somewhere out there, either preparing to fight or already fighting the hordes of the Defiled abominations.

'Faster… I have to walk faster.'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny did just that.

Nothing changed for a while, with his mind still being ravaged by the presence of the revolting runes. But then… a subtle sound reached his ears.

It was the tranquil murmur of water licking a stone shore.

Feeling a spark of hope ignite in his heart, Sunny touched the surface of the Mirror of Truth, feeling cold sweat rolling down his back when he realized that it was almost entirely covered by cracks, now.

The miraculous Memory was going to shatter very soon.

But he was still so far away…

Sunny could not risk separating his shadows from himself, or turning into a swift shadow and gliding forward — the last thing he wanted was to expose his soul to more pain. Feinting in convulsions would be the end of him, so he simply took a deep breath and forced his dazed body into a run, instead.

The Mirror of Truth kept cracking beneath his fingers.

And then, those cracks connected together, producing a quiet, but deafening sound. The miraculous mirror shattered and fell apart, the sharp shards dissipating into a whirlwind of sparks.

He heard the Spell whisper:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

At the same time, Sunny put his foot forward and felt emptiness beneath it. Losing his balance, he fell down and rolled on sharp rocks, quickly becoming covered in bruises.

Thankfully… a few moments later, the pressure of the ghastly runes dissipated, and he was able to take a deep breath.

Sliding down a sharp stone slope felt infinitely less torturous than being surrounded by the horrid writing of Ariel, the Demon of Dread.

Nevertheless, Sunny lingered for a few more seconds before opening his eyes.

His body had indeed rolled down another steep slope, this one leading to a vast and calm lake… or maybe a sea, or an ocean. Sunny could not see the end of it, so he did not know its size. All he knew was that the water was shrouded in darkness and tranquil, reminding him of the peaceful lightlessness of his own soul.

Behind him, the entrance to the tunnel towered like an infinite vertical wound in the mass of black stone. The ceiling of the colossal cavern he had found himself in could not be seen, if there even was one.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny stared at the tranquil lake of dark water with a resentful expression.

'Water… gods, why does it have to be water again?'

Sunny had never encountered a deep body of water that did not hide some terrifying abomination.

Hopefully… this time would be different.

He thought that, but still decided against diving into the lake. Instead, he used the Crown of Twilight, and stepped on the surface of the water instead, walking across it as if it was solid ground.

The surface of the water supported him, barely wetting his dainty silk shoes. Sunny had already experienced walking on water, running on water, and even fighting on water… so, this was nothing new to him.

Nevertheless, the quiet lake that was hidden deep within the heart of the Tomb of Ariel, at the Estuary of the Great River, made a sense of wonder bloom in his heart.

'Can this, perhaps… be the Well of Wishes?'

Chapter-1570: Writ in Water

Sunny did not really believe that the fairy tale Ananke had told him was literal. The magical Well of Wishes did not really exist, and neither did the remnant of the primal desire from which the gods had been born exist in the Estuary. Cassie had told him herself — not everyone's wish would be fulfilled here.

But his would, through some unknown process.

Still, looking at the mysterious lake surrounding him, Sunny could not help but wonder if both of them had, perhaps, been wrong.

Wouldn't it be nice, for something that magical to exist?

But, of course, the dark and seemingly endless lake was not the Well of Wishes Ananke had told him about.

Sunny realized it when faint lights ignited in its depths, and a nauseating feeling assaulted his senses.

'Argh… damn it!'

He staggered slightly, barely keeping himself from plunging into the cold water. Regaining his balance, Sunny stared at the distant lights.

A strange expression appeared on his face.

'Don't tell me…'

There, deep beneath his feet…

More runes shined, weaved from light.

He could not read them, and felt dizzy from merely looking at them, but they were not the same harrowing runes that covered the walls of the tunnel.

Instead, they were the second kind of runes that the Spell refused to translate. The runes that had to do with the Unknown, the progenitor of the daemons.

At least these writings did not threaten to corrupt his soul.

Sunny studied the runes for a few moments, having no idea what they meant. However, strangely… he felt that he was on the cusp of grasping their meaning. It was as if the secrets described by the shining runes were just outside his reach.

'I wonder if Aletheia got that far…'

And the Mad Prince. And all the previous versions of Sunny that had entered the Estuary.

Had any of them learned the secrets written by the Demon of Dread in the depths of a mystical lake? The lake that was hidden behind a tunnel full of Corruption, almost as if guarded by it.

Sunny took a deep breath…

And then, following an impulse, summoned the Sin of Solace.

[Hideous Truth] Enchantment Description: "The more the wielder's sanity is shattered, the more powerful this blade becomes. It bestows revelations of madness on those who give in to its will."

Sunny was not entirely mad, but through the paradoxical nature of the Sin of Solace, the spirit of the cursed sword had long ago reached completion. Therefore… he was long overdue to receive revelations as a reward for reaching the pinnacle of madness.

The hilt of the jade jian landed comfortably in his hand.

And the moment it did, Sunny felt the thin barrier separating him from understanding the nauseating runes dissolving.

Finally, their true meaning was revealed to him.

Looking down, Sunny shuddered as he read:

[Hail Weaver

Demon of Fate

Firstborn

of the Forgotten God]

***

Sunny stared at the familiar runes, dazed.

'Hail… Weaver…'

His mind was in a state of shock… or maybe epiphany. He couldn't tell.

'The… Forgotten God?'

So the Unknown, the progenitor of the daemons… was a god?

The seventh god?

How could it be?!

He raised a hand and wiped his face, suddenly feeling cold.

There were only six gods. Sun God, War God, Beast God, Storm God, Heart God, and Shadow God.

Which was strange, considering how obsessed the Spell — and the Dream Realm as a whole — seemed with the number seven.

But who was the Forgotten God?

Where had another god come from, and how could he be the parent of the daemons?!

Daemons were said to have appeared out of nowhere, creating themselves…

'No, wait.'

If there was a seventh god — which was rather unbelievable, considering that Sunny had never seen him… her… it?... mentioned anywhere — then why would the Spell refuse to translate his name?

And why did Sunny feel dizzy and nauseated when encountering the few, exceedingly rare mentions of him, written in the strange runes?

And why was the name of Weaver written in the runes at the heart of the Tomb of Ariel?

Sunny hesitated for a while, then walked further, heading for the next set of runes shining underwater some distance away.

'Forgotten God, Forgotten God…'

A seventh god existed, huh? That was… very strange.

Soon, he reached the next set of shining runes. They read:

[Hail Hope

Demon of Desire

Daughter

of the Forgotten God]

He frowned a little, then continued walking.

Soon, he walked over the runes mentioning all seven of the daemons: Demon of Fate, Demon of Desire, Demon of Oblivion, Demon of Dread, Demon of Imagination, Demon of Repose, and the Demon of Choice — as well as Destiny.

It seemed that even Ariel had forgotten to mention the name of the Demon of Oblivion. Or perhaps he had, but Sunny had already forgotten reading it.

In any case, all seven daemons were called the children of the Forgotten God.

It was at that moment that a startling realization ignited in Sunny's

mind, making him sway a little.

'Desire, Dread, Repose, Imagination, Oblivion, Destiny, Fate…'

The seventh god… the Forgotten God… was the progenitor of the seven daemons.

In hindsight, it was all so obvious.

'Wouldn't it make him… Dream God?'

Dream God — the god of dreams, nightmares, restoration, imagination, oblivion, and fate.

People dreamed about what they desired. They saw nightmares about things they dreaded. Sleep brought with it rest, and was full of fantastical things. Dreams were easily forgotten, disappearing into oblivion. And, sometimes, dreams brought with them visions of fate… like the prophetic visions Cassie received when she slept.

Destiny, meanwhile, was the other side of fate.

It all made sense.

The seven daemons… each represented one of the Aspects of the seventh god, Dream God.

Who had been forgotten and erased from history, for some reason, only mentioned in forbidden runes that could not be read by most people, and repelled anyone who tried.

Thus becoming...

The Forgotten God.

Chapter-1571: Seventh God

Sunny remained motionless for a while, trying to digest the earth-shaking revelation he had received in the Estuary.

He felt as though he had stumbled on a great, almost unimaginable secret. Something that, perhaps, lay at the root of all the mysteries that had been plaguing him for so long.

There were not six, but seven gods: Sun God, War God, Storm God, Beast God, Heart God, Shadow God… and Dream God, who had been forgotten.

The daemons were children of this Forgotten God.

Therefore… by rebelling against the gods, had they rebelled against their own kin? Just like the gods themselves had waged war against their kin, the ineffable beings of the Void.

'No, wait…'

The connection between the Forgotten God and everything that had happened, and continued to happen, was too deep to be a mere coincidence.

The realms of the gods were destroyed, consumed one after another by the Dream Realm. Seeds of Nightmare bloomed in its depths, infecting the last remaining realm, the waking world, by a plague of Nightmare Creatures.

And then there was the Nightmare Spell, created by Weaver — the firstborn of Dream God.

Had the Forgotten God really been Dream God?

Or had he been Nightmare God?

Or… had he been Dream God once, but then became the god of nightmares?

Why had he been erased from history? Why did the runes describing his title… and not even his real title, but simply referring to him as the Forgotten God… possess a repelling force to them? It was almost as if merely mentioning him was forbidden.

On a level close to a universal law.

'Wait…'

If a mere mention of the Forgotten God was forbidden, was that why Weaver's lineage was described as forbidden, as well? Come to think of it, Sunny had never heard about any of the daemons having offspring. Had they been forbidden from propagating because of their connection to the erased deity?

His head was spinning.

'There's something to it… I am certain.'

The Forgotten God, the Dream Realm, and the Nightmare Spell. There was an obvious connection between them, a throughline that neatly tied it all together. An answer to most of the questions that Sunny had asked himself countless times, but was never able to solve.

The next set of runes shone in the distance, luring him to walk further.

'Maybe that answer lies right ahead.'

Taking a deep breath, Sunny walked across the surface of the hidden lake.

Soon, he reached the source of light. However, to his surprise, it was not a string of runes… instead, it was an image. A familiar image, too.

Surrounded by a field of terrifying darkness, a mass of golden flame was burning, illuminating the void with its radiance.

It was the start of the myth of creation — the scene where desire was born in the everlasting void, bringing with it direction.

'Why is this here?'

Sunny frowned, then walked forward, soon reaching the next source of light.

Again, a familiar image was in front of him… or rather, beneath him. This one, however, was a bit different from what he had seen in the drowned temple of Fallen Grace. On the mural of the drowned temple, there were six radiant figures surrounding the reduced mass of flames, with vague shapes of the Void Creatures hidden in the darkness.

But here, in the waters of the dark lake… there were seven.

And looking at the seventh figure made Sunny feel dizzy and nauseous. It seemed that not only mentioning the Forgotten God was forbidden, but depicting him, as well.

Sunny walked further.

The next several scenes painted in the water were largely the same. They depicted the seven gods fighting against the Void Beings, albeit in a more artistic and mysterious manner.

However… the final scene of the war was very different from how it had been drawn on the mural in the drowning temple.

There, the Void Beings had been shown beaten and diminished, surrounded by the six proud and victorious gods.

Here in the Estuary, though, the scene was entirely not the same. The Void Beings were just as giant and terrifying as ever, and the seven gods were depicted in a desperate fight against them, both sides seemingly on the verge of being destroyed.

The next scene was different, as well.

In the temple, it showed the six gods confidently enveloping the Void, and the harrowing creatures dwelling in it, in a net made from

the remnants of the golden flame. Here, though… the scene was largely the same, with one important distinction.

One of the seven radiant figures was hopelessly caught among the terrifying shapes of the Void Creatures, unable to retreat. Nevertheless, the net of flames still enveloped the void, creating a cage around it.

And sealing the radiant figure in that cage with the beings of the Void.

Sunny shivered, a terrible understanding dawning on him.

He walked to the next scene and saw it…

Just before the net closed, forever sealing the Void, the radiant figure of the seventh god tore seven pieces of itself and sent them flying away. The radiant sparks — much brighter than the remnant sparks of the golden flame that would later become humans — escaped the cage just before it closed.

The final image was very similar to the one depicted in the drowned temple. It showed the familiar picture of forests, plains, river, and a vast sky… the world as Sunny knew it.

Humans were depicted in that image, as well, wandering the landscape as tiny dots.

There were seven vague, but much more prominent figures among them, though, standing under the blue sky, confused and lost.

The daemons.

Sunny trembled.

'This is not the myth of creation.'

Indeed, the story drawn in the depths of the mystical lake was not the myth of creation.

Instead… it was the story of how the daemons were born.

Of how the gods sealed the Void, abandoning one of their own, and how that seventh god tore seven pieces of his soul to let a part of him escape the cage.

Thus becoming the progenitor of the daemons… who were mysterious creatures that were rumored to have appeared from nowhere, possessing a power not quite equal, but similar to that of the gods.

Chapter-1572: Testament of Dread

As it turned out… the daemons had not appeared out of nowhere, nor had they created themselves.

Instead, they were born from the seven pieces of a god whose very existence had been erased from the world, concealed, and forbidden from being mentioned. The seventh god…

The Forgotten God.

Who had been Dream God, once.

So, it was not that the origin of the daemons was unknown. It was just that their very existence was forbidden, and since no one was allowed to remember the Forgotten God, it seemed as if they had appeared from nowhere.

Sunny shivered, and then looked ahead.

There, the last cluster of light was burning under the surface of the dark lake.

He walked forward, his legs numb.

Soon, he reached the light and looked down, seeing runes once again. Taking slow steps, he studied them.

The message left behind by Ariel, the Demon of Dread, read:

[Here is the truth I leave behind

That reveals the lie of the gods

The Forgotten One slumbers

In the Void

Eternal, everchanging

Dreaming of escape

The gods, who were flawless

Learned shame

And were flawless no more

I am a child of their transgression

And thus, their Flaw]

Sunny trembled.

'The gods… were flawless no more…'

Suddenly, he remembered the last thing Noctis had said to him, in the depths of the Second Nightmare, just before Hope broke free of her chains. He remembered the weight of the four words the whimsical sorcerer had whispered:

'Never trust the gods.'

The gods… were liars, indeed.

They left one of their own in the cage they had built to imprison the Void, and, full of shame, erased his existence from the world.

Was that how the universal law of imperfection had been born? Or maybe it had gone the other way around, and it was precisely the creation of the law of imperfection that had given the gods the final push they needed to seal the Void.

Thus making the Forgotten God their Flaw.

And, therefore, making the daemons, who had been born from his soul, living incarnations of that Flaw.

Was that what Hope had meant when she spoke to him?

Hope, who had been imprisoned by Sun God, her kingdom destroyed, after mortals started worshiping her.

'Wait… no…'

Was shame really what had made the gods forbid the knowledge of the Forgotten God from spreading?

Or was there something deeper hiding behind that colossal lie?

'The law of imperfection…'

Everything in the world created by the gods was imperfect, including the gods themselves. Therefore… the seal they had placed on the Void had to be imperfect, as well.

Which meant that it could be broken.

That, in a sense, was their Flaw, too.

And therefore, the Forgotten God, who had been sealed in the void for so long, slumbering, could one day break free.

What would happen if he did?

Suddenly, something clicked in Sunny's head.

'No… not what would happen.'

He paled, an expression of utter terror appearing on his face.

'What has happened.'

There were seven gods, not six.

And therefore, there had to be seven divine realms, not six, like Wind Flower had told him.

The waking world was the sixth, most likely belonging to War God…

While the Dream Realm was the seventh, belonging to the Forgotten God.

The Dream Realm, which was devouring all the rest and spreading Corruption to all of existence through the blooming Seeds of Nightmare.

Corruption was the result of the Void influencing that which had been created by the gods…

What would happen if one of the gods was exposed to the Void for eons, then?

Could there be a corrupted god? The God of Corruption?

Sunny trembled once again.

That god… had already broken free of his seal.

But, perhaps, he was still asleep. And all of existence was in the throes of his nightmare.

'The Forgotten God… has succumbed to Corruption.'

And the day he was released would have brought doom to the world created by the gods. So, they had to have done everything in their power to prevent him from growing stronger, restless, and awakening from his slumber.

They had erased all mentions of his existence from the world. They had forbidden the daemons from siring offspring, thus preventing the propagation the lineage of the Forgotten God.

And they had destroyed Hope's kingdom when people started worshiping her… and, through her, the god from whom she was created.

Which was a really cruel punishment, considering that daemons had not even been aware of their origin at the time. After all, the description of the Mantle of the Underworld stated it clearly about Nether…

[...He wasn't the first to lead his army against the gods. However, he was the first to shed their blood, as well as learn the secrets of his own.]

Nether had been the first to reveal the lie of the gods and learn the truth of his origin.

Sunny gritted his teeth, feeling sick.

'Damnation… damnation…'

Finally, the history of the Dream Realm was revealed in front of him.

Except for the very end of it.

What had happened during the Doom War?

How had the gods and the daemons perished?

How had the seal of the Void been broken?

And if it had been broken, why wasn't all of existence already consumed by it?

Why was the Forgotten God still sleeping, instead of awakening to devour everything?

Most importantly of all…

What was the true purpose of the Nightmare Spell, and what was Weaver's real goal?

Remembering the scheming daemon, Sunny suddenly shuddered.

'Wait… wait a minute…'

The daemons had been forbidden from propagating, and yet the Demon of Fate still secretly created a lineage. The forbidden lineage… which Sunny had inherited.

Since the blood of Weaver was flowing through his veins…

Did it mean that he had actually inherited the lineage of the Forgotten God?

'What the hell does that mean?!'

Sunny raised his hands and clutched at his hair.

He was a bit overwhelmed.

After finally solving countless mysteries about the past of the world, despite that very knowledge having been forbidden from being learned by a divine law… he was left with one final set of questions.

But these questions were perhaps the most important, because they directly influenced the present — and, therefore, the future.

His future, as well as that of everyone he knew.

'Argh!'

Sunny would have loved to spend an eternity contemplating the many harrowing revelations he had received. But he wasn't sure that he could endure it, at the moment.

Most importantly… he didn't have time!

His freedom was here, somewhere, in the Estuary of the Great River.

Hidden at the very heart of it…

Where the most burdensome truth Ariel wanted to be free of should have been buried.

Sunny had to reach it before Nephis burned the First Seeker to ash.

Therefore, gritting his teeth, he tried to calm his frenzied mind and hurriedly walked forward.

'Lying gods, forgotten gods, corrupted gods… I'll deal with all of this later!'

The Forgotten God dreamed of being free…

Well, Sunny dreamed of being free, as well!

And his wish was almost within his grasp.

So, he was going to make sure that he didn't fail to grasp it, at all

costs.

Chapter-1573: Stone Maze

Sunny turned away from the chilling testament that Ariel had left behind in the silent waters of the still lake and continued forward.

There were a million thoughts in his mind. The magnitude of the revelation he had received dwarfed almost everything Sunny knew — the very reason for the cold reality he was born into now had an explanation. The future, too, had become much clearer. And it was a frightening future, as well.

The gods were dead… but not all of them.

The seventh god was still alive, slumbering in the cradle of the Void. All of existence was already infected by the horrors of his nightmare, and once the Forgotten One awakened, even that ailing world would come to an end.

And yet, Sunny had no desire to ponder these truths right now.

The matters of corrupted gods and dying worlds were far away. The dreadful future they promised was far away, too… although perhaps not as far as he would have hoped for. In any case, none of it held any meaning as long as he was bound.

As long as he wasn't free.

Free to live his life the way he wished to live it, as well as free to try and change the predestined outcome. Even if the end promised by the truth of Ariel truly came before Sunny died peacefully of old age, even if he failed to change anything, in the end... there was really only one thing sadder than living as a slave.

It was dying as one.

So, Sunny wished to gain freedom even more desperately now.

And, unlike the dreadful truth, his freedom was near.

The Guiding Light was still shining, pointing across the dark waters. Sunny followed that light through the darkness.

As he walked across the still lake, subtle ripples spread from where he stepped. His reflection walked alongside him, and a few steps back, the Sin of Solace followed, staring at Sunny with hateful eyes.

'Why is he being so quiet?'

There was something strange happening to the sword wraith. He seemed… different, somehow, ever since they had entered the Estuary. Sunny had long grown accustomed to the company of the loathsome apparition, but now, he was growing wary of its presence.

Not the least because he knew now what harrowing knowledge the Sin of Solace was harboring, prevented from sharing it only by the seal placed on him by the Estuary Key.

Just like the Void could break its seal and consume all of existence, the knowledge of it that the wraith possessed would consume Sunny should the Estuary Key disappear.

The thought was chilling.

'It's… a good thing I never tried to transfer the Key of the Estuary to someone, I guess.'

Sunny continued to walk across the dark lake, losing all sense of time — or rather, what little of it he had left. There were no lights shining under the surface of the water anymore, but gradually, the lake itself changed.

Its surface, which had been calm before, was slowly growing restless. There were powerful currents moving underneath the surface, making the dark water stir and surge, forming waves. Soon, advancing had become harder.

Eventually, Sunny saw something in the distance. Jagged rocks were rising from the water, resembling cliffs. The water was flowing between them, restless, and wisps of mist rose here and there.

The silence was broken by the sound of rushing water and the whispers of distant currents.

Sunny reached the towering black rocks, looking at the surging water with a complicated expression. There was a labyrinth formed by the passages between the jagged cliffs, shrouded in mist. The water traveled through the stone maze, disappearing from view.

He could hear it roar in the distance, as if plunging from great heights.

He could also feel the very fabric of reality grow thin and strange all around him.

'What is this place…'

Sunny did not know… but he had a suspicion.

And that suspicion only grew when he noticed something at the base of one of the cliffs. There, a mark had been left on the black stone, as if cut into it by a sharp blade.

Two runes, one meaning "sun", the other meaning "loss".

'The Mad Prince passed through here.'

And not only him.

Looking into the passages formed between the cliffs and listening to the distant roar of water, Sunny felt sure that here, the lake hidden in the inner part of the Estuary connected back to the Great River.

Only, since the lake existed entirely outside of time, the connections it formed were special.

If he followed one of the streams, he would most likely be able to exit the Estuary. He would also enter the Great River at a point in time different from where he had left it — perhaps far in the future.

Or, perhaps, far in the past.

Long before the day he had entered the Nightmare.

That was how the Mad Prince had been able to invade a cycle of the Great River where he was not meant to exist — and had taken the future Plagues with him. Cassie had said so herself…

What had her exact words been?

'After reaching the Estuary and using it to invade the next cycle of the Great River, the two of them meticulously prepared the playing field for the arrival of us, the new challengers.'

Sunny had not paid attention to these words back then, overwhelmed by other matters, but now, he finally understood what Cassie had meant.

The Estuary existed outside of time… or rather, time itself did not exist yet in the Estuary. So, the relationship between this eerie place and the rest of the Tomb of Ariel was tenuous at best.

By choosing the right passage, one could escape the usual cyclical flow of the Great River and travel to a different time — not the subjective time of the Great River represented by its current, but the objective time that dictated the rise and fall of its civilization.

If Sunny had a thousand attempts, he could map the labyrinth and find a way to come and go as he pleased, visiting different eras of the Tomb of Ariel. He could even travel to a time before the Plagues invaded the latest cycle, prepare for their arrival, then destroy them in one fell swoop.

They had not been as powerful back then, after all.

That way… perhaps, the River Civilization would not decline as fast. Perhaps Twilight would not be destroyed, yet. Perhaps the Nightmare could be conquered differently.

But then again, maybe not. Maybe Twilight had always been fated to be destroyed by the forces of the Defilement, and the beautiful cities of the sybils had always been fated to fall apart and drown.

In any case, he did not have a thousand attempts.

He barely had one.

And so, Sunny entered the labyrinth and followed the Guiding Light, wondering where it would lead him.

Would he return to the Great River?

Would he be sent into the future? Or into the past?

Whose True Name had Torment delivered to Cassie, and how would finding that creature — or place — release him from the chains of fate?

He was going to find out.

Eventually, there was nothing left around him except for towering cliffs and rushing water. Sunny used the Dark Wing to glide between the jagged rocks, propelling himself forward with stunning speed. He felt a need to hurry, knowing that Nephis was somewhere out there, leading an assault on Verge…

In the end, the Guiding Light led him to neither the future nor the past.

Instead… the radiant crystal simply showed him the way through the labyrinth, keeping away from the sound of roaring water.

Escaping the misty labyrinth, Sunny found himself in front of a vast body of water once again. He was back to the calmer reaches of the dark lake.

The part of it hidden behind the maze of cliffs, though…

Was entirely different from what he had seen near the shore.

'W—what is this…'

Sunny froze for a moment, gazing forward with a pale face.

In front of him… countless corpses were floating in the water.

It was very much like the dreadful sight of the slaughter that had happened at the approach to Twilight, but with one striking difference.

If the carcasses littering the still water there belonged to the Defiled abominations, then here, all of them seemed to belong to Great Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny knew it because there were numerous husks of Dark Butterflies among the floating corpses, all lifeless despite having no discernible wounds.

Something had violently destroyed their very souls, leaving only lifeless corpses behind.

And there, far away…

Did it only look that way, or was something dark rising from the water?

The Guiding Light was pointing directly at that distant speck of darkness.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then gritted his teeth and took a step forward.

As he did, something vast moved in the depths of the still water…

And gazed at him.

Chapter-1574: Whoever Fights Monsters

Sunny staggered as the gaze of the being hiding beneath the still water of the lake fell on him. A scream almost escaped from his lips, but he gritted his teeth and pushed it down.

'Ah…'

The feeling of being looked upon by the invisible watcher… whatever it was… was unlike anything he had ever experienced. Sunny had been in the presence of powerful people before, and even more powerful Nightmare Creatures. He had been crushed by the suffocating force of their presence, and struggled to move while being pressed down by it.

But the gaze of the being hiding under the silent dark waves was entirely different.

It was not only heavier and more insurmountable, hinting at the terrifying power of the hidden watcher, but also did not feel the same. The force of oppression emanated by mighty beings was usually aimless and directionless, while the chilling gaze… was piercing and penetrating.

It felt as though the mysterious being was not simply looking at Sunny from beneath the mass of dark water, but rather looking through him.

Sunny's body, mind, and his very soul were like an open book in front of the hidden watcher, and they were being read, one page after another.

'G—gods, gods…'

His soul was being witnessed.

And, somehow, Sunny felt that it was more than that.

His soul was being judged.

Paled, he slowly looked around, seeing the floating corpses of the Great Nightmare Creatures in a new light.

Had all these harrowing abominations… failed to pass the judgment?

Just what was this place? Was there something else hidden at the very heart of the nebulous lake, even after all the forbidden knowledge left behind on its shore and in the depths of its outer reaches? Why had Ariel placed it behind the labyrinth of rushing currents and mist, leaving a fearsome guardian behind?

Sunny grimaced, swayed a little… and took a step forward.

Then, another.

'Go on, judge me. I… have nothing to hide…'

He did not know what he was being judged for, but the sincerity of his wish to be free was indisputable. Hopefully, the dreadful being would see its purity, and let him pass.

Feeling as if he was walking to his execution, Sunny walked toward the very heart of the Estuary — the speck of darkness that the Guiding Light was pointing at. He maneuvered around the motionless corpses of the Great Nightmare Creatures, who had all lost their lives in this eerie place, and forced himself to put one foot in front of the other.

One step at a time.

The harrowing gaze followed him for a while, inhuman and indifferent…

Then, the feeling of something vast and ancient watching him suddenly disappeared, leaving him shaken and rattled.

Sunny staggered again, filled with incredible relief, and almost let out a groan.

It seemed that he had passed the judgment.

'What was that thing looking for?'

Who was allowed to approach the heart of the Estuary, and who was not?

Why did the guardian let Sunny pass?

He regained his balance and looked forward with dark resolve burning in his eyes.

'Come on… you are almost there.'

Feeling battered and drained from being looked upon by the invisible, inconceivable guardian of the inner lake, Sunny forced his tired body to continue walking.

He walked and walked, eventually leaving all the floating corpses behind.

Now, there was nothing in front of him except for the still expanse of dark water and the vague shape rising from it in the distance.

…Oh, and one other thing.

A few dozen steps in front of him, a familiar figure was standing on the water, looking at him with no humor in its dark eyes.

It was the Sin of Solace, who had disappeared somewhere just before the chilling gaze fell on Sunny.

Now, the sword wraith was back, standing in Sunny's way with a cold expression on his face.

'I guess it's time, then…'

Sunny grinned darkly and took another step forward.

As he did…

He felt something shattering within his soul, and the Spell whispered into his ear, its voice somber:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny did not have to look at his runes to know which of his Memories had mysteriously destroyed itself.

It was the Memory that had appeared in his soul without an explanation, and was now gone without an explanation.

The Key of the Estuary.

Why had it been destroyed?

Well, that much was obvious…

It was because whatever door the Mad Prince had wanted to unlock with it was already ajar.

Feeling a dark kind of amusement, Sunny slowly walked to the Sin of Solace and stopped just a step or two away from him.

The loathsome sword wraith looked cold, not at all delighted despite being free of the seal that had constrained him for so long.

However, somehow… he also looked much more sinister than before.

The apparition stared at Sunny with a bit of contempt, a bit of resentment… and a bit of pity.

"Here we are… you fool. Really, how could you not expect that outcome?"

Sunny met his gaze and sighed.

How could he have not expected this to happen?

Of course, he had.

The actions of the Mad Prince had always been bizarre and almost impossible to understand. The depths of the schemes the vile madman had woven were nothing short of unfathomable, destroying

countless lives and reshaping the entire Nightmare to his will.

Sunny had long guessed what drove the Mad Prince… it was his desire to redeem the sin of killing Nephis and bring her back to life.

That said…

Who was to say that his previous self only had one goal? Who was to say that he had been willing to simply cease to exist, thus preventing himself from enjoying the fruits of his labor?

After all, if there was one thing Sunny knew about himself… it was that he was a cockroach.

He was very hard to kill, and even if something did manage to kill him, he had a strange track record of somehow finding a way to come back to life.

So why would the Mad Prince be any different?

Of course, there was a bit of contradiction between what the two of them wanted.

It was because, in order for the Mad Prince to come back to life, Sunny had to disappear. He had to become a vessel to the memories of the vile madman, and lose his sanity to Corruption.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny stared at the Sin of Solace silently.

So… which one of them would get to exist?

Which one of them would manage to outscheme the other?

Chapter-1575: Free of Sin

Sunny had an inkling that the Mad Prince had not been willing to quietly disappear for a while now. However, it had always been just that — a suspicion, substantiated by nothing except for his knowledge of himself.

Sunny wouldn't have wanted to cease to exist, so why would his Defiled version be any different?

The Mad Prince had wished to be free, and in the process of fulfilling that wish, he caused Neph's death. His soul was consumed by the Defilement, but not entirely so — a small sliver of his humanity remained due to the Sin of Solace, who preserved it to torment his host better.

And so, the vile madman came to regret pursuing his wish. He schemed and conspired to bring Nephis back to life and create such a cycle of the Great River where the Nightmare could be conquered by the cohort. He turned his friends into the Plagues, and then betrayed them, arranging for each to be slaughtered.

But was that all that the Mad Prince had wanted?

Apparently, no.

Sunny was a greedy person, and his past self had to have been, too. Therefore… there were at least two more things the Mad Prince had schemed to achieve.

The first one was more or less obvious. He had not only wished to bring Nephis back to life, but to be with her, as well.

Staring at the Sin of Solace, Sunny shook his head in disgust.

'That crazy bastard. Did he really think that Neph would accept a

horrid Corrupted maniac like him?'

Well… it was in the name. Despite all his devious cunning, at the end of the day, the Mad Prince was exactly that — entirely and utterly mad. Sunny had no doubt that the lunatic imagined countless ways to bend the future to his will in that perverse head of his.

The Sin of Solace, meanwhile, smiled darkly.

"Oh… I see that you are starting to understand. I am sorry to say this, though — it's already too late for you."

Sunny simply stared at him without saying anything.

Indeed, he was starting to understand.

How the Mad Prince had planned to return, and why was it only happening now.

There was a second thing he must have wanted to achieve, after all.

And that thing… was to reach the heart of the Estuary.

Sunny could not have come to that conclusion before, but after witnessing the inner sanctum of the hidden lake and experiencing the chilling gaze of its guardian, he realized something.

There was indeed one last secret hidden at the very heart of the Estuary… perhaps the most terrible, and the most precious, of them all. And Ariel had arranged for that secret to be protected above all else.

Only those who passed the judgment of the guardian of the lake had the right to learn that secret.

That judgment… appeared to be a very simple one.

Why had the Great Nightmare Creatures that found their way into the Estuary been slain, while Sunny was allowed to pass?

…It was because their souls were Corrupted, while his was not.

Corruption was not allowed to come near the heart of the Estuary, as if Ariel had not wanted for whatever was hidden there to be sullied by its vile touch.

And, therefore… the Mad Prince had not been able to witness the final secret, either.

As the Sin of Solace looked at him mockingly, Sunny smiled.

'Of course… it was so obvious.'

How could the Mad Prince, a Corrupted Titan, infiltrate the heart of the Estuary if no Corrupted creature could?

The answer… was oblivion.

He had to forget the knowledge of the Void that planted the seeds of Corruption into his soul at the start of each cycle, pass the judgment of the lake guardian, and then regain his memories again.

So, the Mad Prince had created the Key of the Estuary — a Memory meant to get him to the innermost sanctum of the Estuary intact. A Memory that placed a seal on the Sin of Solace, thus preventing the sword wraith from sharing the knowledge of the Void and the memories of all previous cycles with Sunny.

Only for that seal to be broken once it served its purpose and got Sunny past the lake guardian.

Thus bringing the Mad Prince back in all his unholy glory.

The Sin of Solace chuckled.

"Ah… don't look so dejected. Whatever anger you feel, I feel more of it. Being stuck with you is already bad enough, you worm. Being stuck with the other guy? Gods. I've endured that for too long already."

He sighed.

"But, well. What's done is done. There is no way to escape the inevitable, now."

Sunny glared at him and outstretched a hand, summoning the jade jian into existence.

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Oh, wait… I guess you can just destroy me before your soul is corrupted, huh?"

The sword wraith was immune to the flow of the Great River, keeping his memories of all the past cycles. And, since he was nothing but a splintered piece of Sunny's own mind, that knowledge would slowly seep through and contaminate the rest of his mind — like it had happened on Aletheia's Island.

The Sin of Solace could just whisper the secrets of the Void to Sunny directly, but he did not have to. Eventually, that knowledge would infect Sunny's mind simply because it was already there.

However… it would not happen instantly. Just like it had happened on Aletheia's Island, and even earlier with the cycles of the Great River, Sunny had some time before the contamination started in earnest.

If he was to somehow destroy the Sin of Solace during that time, the splintered part of his mind would be eradicated, and the terrible knowledge contained within it would be erased without a trace.

The problem was…

The beautiful jian appeared in Sunny's hand, its blade carved from pristine white jade.

[Perfect Jade] Enchantment Description: "This blade is carved from a piece of sublime jade, and as such is sharp and durable beyond logic and reason."

The Sin of Solace was a Transcendent Memory with an enchantment that drastically enhanced its durability, while Sunny was merely an Ascended. Was he even strong enough to break it?

And if he did break it... would the wraith born from it truly disappear?

Chapter-1576: Dreadful Whisper

Sunny had to destroy the Sin of Solace before the seeds of Corruption were planted into his soul. If he managed to destroy the wraith before that happened, the scheme the Mad Prince had concocted to come back to life would be thwarted, and Sunny would get to continue existing.

If he failed, the Mad Prince would return, consuming him in the process.

'That vile bastard…'

The sword wraith laughed as he watched him.

"My, oh my. You're not going to do something terrible to me, are you?"

Sunny glanced at him darkly, then at the beautiful jian in his hand.

Placing the Guiding Light on the water, he wrapped all six of his shadows around him and grabbed the jade blade, using all his inhuman strength in an attempt to break it against his knee.

The Sin of Solace was not only incredibly resilient, but also incredibly sharp. Despite the Marble Shell, Sunny could not get a good hold of it without losing his fingers… and even if he could, his strength seemed insufficient to shatter the cursed sword.

Even though his muscles felt like they were on the verge of tearing, the jian only bent, but did not break. As soon as Sunny released it, the blade sprung back to its initial, perfectly straight form.

'Maybe… I should try to escape back under the gaze of the lake guardian…'

But no, that would only end in his demise. The Sin of Solace was a part of him, and now that the Estuary Key had been destroyed, the guardian would obliterate them both.

The wraith chuckled, observing his efforts with disdain.

"Pathetic."

Sunny abandoned his attempts to break the jade blade and straightened.

Then, he smiled.

So what if he wasn't strong enough to break the damned sword?

That whole performance was just to satiate his curiosity, anyway.

Before the sword wraith could say anything else, he released his shadows and tossed the beautiful jian away.

A moment later, a hand rose from one of the shadows, catching the cursed sword. Saint stepped out of it, holding it with indifferent grace.

As an Ascended, Sunny might not have been strong enough to shatter the Sin of Solace. But luckily, he had a Transcendent Devil at hand… two of them, even.

It would have been even easier to make Fiend eat the jade blade, but he was worried that the cursed thing would give the ravenous ogre indigestion. So, the job of destroying the sinister Memory fell to Saint.

As the six shadows wrapped themselves around the graceful knight, her ruby eyes blazed with crimson light. The wraith opened his eyes widely.

"Now, wait a second…"

Not paying him any attention — or rather, incapable of perceiving him — Saint silently placed the flat of the jade blade against her greave, slowly raised her shield, and then struck the cursed sword

with its rim.

A gust of hurricane wind spread from the point of impact, and the surface of the lake rippled.

The Sin of Solace cracked, then exploded into shards of beautiful white jade, which dissipated into a whirlwind of white sparks. Those sparks were then absorbed into Saint's stonelike body.

Sunny heard the Spell whispering into his ear, saying the same words for the second time in the last few minutes:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

A slight grimace appeared on his face. Losing Memories never felt good.

…There was the grimace on the face of the sword wraith, too.

"Argh! Aaah!"

The apparition convulsed, screaming, and hunched over.

For a few moments, there was silence.

And then, the silence was broken by the sound of mocking laughter.

"Oh, oh. It seems that breaking the sword… did nothing? I am perfectly fine. Who would have known?"

The Sin of Solace straightened and stared at Sunny with a disdainful grin.

"Fool… did you really think that it would work?"

Sunny stared at him silently, his face pale and grim.

The wraith shook his head.

"If it was that easy to get rid of me, do you think that I would still be here? Ah, Lost from Light… I am a part of your mind, now. The cause of me might have been that Memory of yours, but the source of me… is you. So, what good would destroying the sword do?"

The contemptuous smile slowly disappeared from his face, replaced by a cold and dark expression.

It was a little bit dejected, too.

The Sin of Solace sighed.

"Now, let's end this farce. It has been… a displeasure. To spend time with you, once again. Granted, what comes won't be pleasant, either…"

He opened his mouth, as if wanting to say something… some terrible truth that would drive Sunny mad and infect his soul with Corruption, without a doubt.

But before he could, Sunny took a step forward, coming face-to-face with the startled wraith, and leaned forward a little.

Then, he whispered into his ear…

Only two words.

The first words he had spoken after saying farewell to Cassie at the shore of Verge.

They were:

"Be gone."

And as he said them, the world shuddered.

The wraith's eyes widened slightly — this time, in earnest.

"You…"

And then, he was gone.

Erased, as if he had never existed.

The splintered part of Sunny's mind was gone, taking the forbidden knowledge of the Void, and all the memories of the previous cycles, with it.

Preventing the Mad Prince from ever being born again.

Healed from the curse that had plagued him since the early days of the Southern Campaign, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, and then let out a long sigh.

Then, he looked down.

There was a thin thread tied around his neck — the same thread with which the mouths of the Voiceless Prelates, a band of Corrupted Demons led by a Devil named the Defiled Herald, had been sewn shut. Sunny had slain them back in Antarctica, receiving a certain Memory in the process.

That Memory was the Stifled Scream, a charm he usually used to augment Saint.

The charm possessed a second enchantment, though, which the graceful knight had never been able to use.

[Word of Power] Enchantment Description: "A word spoken by the master of this charm is a command. If born of great silence, the word of power can hardly be ignored. If not, it has no worth."

Saint never spoke, so [Word of Power] could not be used by her. Sunny, meanwhile, was never able to remain silent for long enough to let the enchantment accumulate enough potency.

The longer one remained silent, the more tyrannical the authority of the [Word of Power] would become.

And so, knowing that he might face the machinations of the Mad Prince in one way or another, Sunny had summoned the Stifled Scream.

That was the Memory he had summoned while bidding farewell to Cassie.

And ever since then, he had not made a sound.

The Great River was a river of time. And so, by traversing it, Sunny had let the Stifled Scream accumulate a lot of power… but much

more than that, he entered the Estuary while wearing it.

Time did not exist in the Estuary, which meant that there was no difference between a single moment and an eternity here.

How dreadful would a silence that had lasted for an eternity be?

…Dreadful enough to obliterate the Sin of Solace, it seemed.

And powerful enough to save Sunny's life.

Not having to maintain silence anymore, he took a deep breath, and then cursed quietly.

'Damnation. You go to hell... me.'

The Mad Prince was gone.

This time, forever.

Which meant that Sunny had joined the exclusive club that Jet, Kai, and Cassie were already members of. He had vanquished an evil version of himself.

It also meant that the path to the heart of the Estuary was completely free.

Picking up the Guiding Light, Sunny dismissed Saint and headed for the vague shape rising above the dark waters of the nebulous lake.

The final secret of the Tomb of Ariel awaited there.

Chapter-1577: Past, Present, and Future

Limping across the dark expanse of still water, illuminated gently by the pure radiance of the Guiding Light, Sunny stared at his battered reflection. A dark grin twisted his lips into a crooked line.

"Look at us… nearing the finish line, and not anywhere near dropping dead."

The situation was quite unfamiliar. Usually, Sunny would have been at the very doorstep of death, or even past its threshold with one foot by now. But he was strangely in one piece. Sure, he had been mauled and mangled by plenty of dreadful Nightmare Creatures on the way to the Estuary — however, his state was nowhere near as rough as the norm in such moments.

Had he been lucky, or had his tenacity finally reached such an unreasonable level that it was simply too hard for anything to truly bring him down without outright killing him?

"Well, in any case… I'm not complaining. Let's finish this, then…"

His reflection did not answer, leaving Sunny in tranquil silence. He was momentarily unnerved by the lack of a mocking retort, but then remembered that the Sin of Solace was gone. His mind was free of the voice that had haunted it for so long with maddening whispers.

It felt... very strange.

'Sort of… peaceful?'

Now that the curse that had plagued him was gone, Sunny realized that he had been under constant pressure without even noticing it. His mental resistance had prevented the insidious whispers from truly

driving him mad — but the act of resisting the loss of sanity itself had been putting a burden on his mind.

That burden was no more, filling him with a sense of levity.

However, he was also exhausted, drained, and deeply shaken by the secrets he had learned. It was a strange mixture of emotions.

'One step at a time.'

Sunny continued walking toward the vague shape rising from the water in the distance. As he did, he wondered about himself and the Mad Prince… about all the versions of himself and the Mad Prince that had reached the Estuary in the previous cycles.

How was it that Sunny — the current him — was the only one who had made it that far?

'I guess it's simple, really.'

It was already indescribably hard to find the entrance to the Estuary within the Source. Beyond that, though…

To get to the heart of the Estuary, one had to possess three things. The first one was a soul that was free of Corruption — made possible by the Estuary Key. That requirement itself demanded that he succumbed to the Defilement, invaded another cycle of the Great River, and spent centuries accumulating power and knowledge.

However, it was also the easiest of the three.

The second requirement was the ability to pass the stone maze that served as the border of the inner lake without falling back into the cycles of the Great River. Sunny did it without much trouble, but that was only because of the Guiding Light and the True Name that Torment had delivered to Cassie. How many cycles had it taken for the duo of conspiring Plagues to learn that True Name?

He did not know. What he did know, however, was that the story of this Nightmare was the story of the gradual accumulation of knowledge. The more cycles the Mad Prince and Torment had survived, the better they had been able to prepare for the last one.

The third requirement was, perhaps, the most dire one, and depended entirely on that accumulation. It was to have no desire to turn back and start a new cycle.

Even now, Sunny could turn back, return to the stone maze, and dive back into the Great River. However, he did not want to, and had no reason to… because the Mad Prince and Torment had already arranged for the Nightmare to end perfectly, with every member of the cohort — and Nephis — surviving its dreadful challenge.

How many attempts had it taken before they learned to manipulate all the events of the cycle in their favor? Too many to count, perhaps. And it was for that reason that Sunny was not tempted to try anew, aiming for a better, and less heartbreaking result.

In short…

Sunny made it that far because he was the inheritor and beneficiary of all the countless past versions of himself that had failed.

It was somewhat poetic, then, that he could only reach the heart of the Estuary by forgetting them all.

And a little bit sad.

…Soon, he could see the dark shape more clearly. As it revealed itself, a strange expression appeared on his face.

Out there in front of him… a mountain of black rock rose from the still water of the hidden lake, rising into the darkness. Its rough slopes were almost vertical, and it had two peaks, one of them broken, one of them as sharp as a spear.

Surrounded by water, the dark mountain looked lonely and forlorn in the empty expanse of the Estuary.

It also exerted a palpable pressure, making Sunny groan and shudder in dread.

'What the hell is this…'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, staring at the peak of the

mountain and wondering if he would have to scale it. But then, he noticed a wide vertical crack at the base of the slope.

It looked like an entrance.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny smiled darkly and headed for that entrance. Passing its threshold, he plunged into the darkness dwelling inside the mountain and found himself in a long, winding tunnel.

There was water rushing beneath his feet, flowing to somewhere deep inside, and the walls surrounding him were rough, untouched by any tool.

'Not creepy at all.'

Somehow, Sunny felt… solemn. It was as though the mountain he had entered was a consecrated place — a place more holy than any temple he had ever visited, and therefore more divine.

Perhaps he had only been able to enter it because of the flame of divinity burning in his soul.

But at the same time, the sacral nature of the dark mountain felt strangely mournful.

Frowning, Sunny gripped the Guiding Light and ventured deeper into the tunnel.

He walked for a few moments — or maybe an eternity — before the walls of the tunnel widened, opening into a vast cave.

And as soon as Sunny entered that cave…

He suddenly turned blind.

The radiance of the Guiding Light was swallowed by darkness, and he lost the ability to see through it. What rattled Sunny the most, though, was that it was not the true, elemental darkness that had robbed him of vision.

Instead, he was still surrounded by deep shadows, which were like family to him. It was just that these shadows did not respond to him

anymore, as if subjugated by some other, much more powerful and terrifying being.

At least his shadow sense was still with him.

Therefore, he sensed something vast moving in the darkness — in front of him, behind him. All around him.

Slithering like the coils of a gargantuan serpent.

Shivering, Sunny gripped the Guiding Light and lowered it slightly, ready to defend himself…

It was then that a harrowing voice resounded from the darkness, enveloping him like a hiss of the lightless abyss:

"Turn back."

Sunny gasped, feeling an almost overwhelming desire to kneel under the cold authority of that sinister voice.

He swayed, leaning on the Guiding Light for support. A tortured groan escaped from his lips, but in the end, Sunny somehow managed to remain standing.

'Damn it…'

He muttered a stifled curse and gritted his teeth, staring blindly into the darkness.

The shadows did not respond to his calls.

Sunny felt… strangely betrayed by their silence.

The harrowing voice resounded again, making him shudder:

"Leave."

Sunny grimaced.

Then, he sighed, and answered in a dark tone:

"...You can drop the theatrics, you know."

There were a few moments of silence, and then the voice resounded again.

This time, it did not sound like the hiss of the abyss itself. Instead, it was quite human, although still strangely coming from all directions.

The voice laughed.

"Ah… damnation. I really wanted to give a good performance. You are such a killjoy…"

The darkness was suffused by the dying echoes of humorless laughter for a few moments, and then the voice added, its tone incredulous:

"But then again, I can't really blame you. I vaguely remember this conversation, after all. It's a bit weird, to finally find myself on the other side of it."

Sunny winced, a resentful expression appearing on his pale face.

'Curse it. Of course, this had to happen… why the hell wouldn't it?'

He had already dealt with a past version of himself. The Mad Prince was no more.

Now, however…

There was the future version of himself, as well.

The voice — Sunny's own voice — spoke placidly from the darkness:

"When did you figure it out?"

Chapter-1578: Lost Shadow

Sunny remained silent for a while, still blind. His expression was somber, and there was an irritated twist to his lips.

'When did I figure it out?'

He grimaced.

"Just now, really."

Which was rather embarrassing.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then shrugged.

"Well, can you blame me? Sure, I should have known much sooner. But there were so many things happening all at once… so, it took me some time to put the dots together."

He raised the Guiding Light and put it on his shoulder, still unable to see the radiance of the sacred staff.

"I mean, it is rather obvious in hindsight. Cassie was sent into the body of Dusk of Fallen Grace. Jet and Effie were sent into the bodies of two River Nomads. Kai and Mordret were sent into the bodies of two Riverborn warriors in Twilight. But what about me and Nephis? Who were the people that we replaced?

And what were they doing so far upstream, in the distant future, way further than even Weave?"

He shook his head.

"I really should have understood it when we found the Chain Breaker. But I was so overwhelmed by how bizarre everything in the Tomb of Ariel was that I let it rest with the rest of the unresolved mysteries. And even as those mysteries were solved one after another, that one

remained buried under the pile of startling revelations.

I just sort of assumed that someone in the past — Noctis, maybe — had visited the pyramid, leaving their imprint in the Great River."

Sunny tiredly rubbed his face and smiled.

"But it was the opposite, wasn't it? It was not someone from the past. It was someone from the future. It was Nephis and me. We are going to return to the Tomb of Ariel one day, right? Not the illusion of it conjured inside this Nightmare, but the real deal.

And just like Daeron had left his imprint to exist in the Nightmare, so will we. So… the bodies the two of us took. They have always been our own bodies. The roles we took are of ourselves."

The voice remained silent for a while, then scoffed.

"Right. I remember now. Yes, we should have figured it out much sooner."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"I must say, though… it's a bit unfair. The Spell gave us our own roles, but made us mere Ascended. The two of you must be much more powerful, no? To brave the Nightmare Desert and enter the real pyramid. So, what are you? A Saint?"

The voice remained silent for longer now, then sighed.

"Yeah… a Saint."

Sunny frowned, judging how long the pause before the answer had been.

"Bastard… did you just summon Weaver's Mask?!"

The voice laughed.

"Did I? No, I absolutely did not. Trust me, I'm telling the truth... I'm the most honest person in the world, after all. Two worlds, even."

'Did he summon it or not?'

Was this future version of Sunny really a Saint? No, like hell he was… a mere Saint would not have been able to turn the shadows against Sunny so easily, and neither would his voice possess such a harrowing power to it.

Sunny shivered.

"You… you're a Sovereign? Damnation, what the hell?! After everything we experienced in this damned place, why would you go and challenge another Nightmare?! Are you that tired of living?"

The voice did not respond for a while. Then, his answer came, calm and insidious:

"I am not a Sovereign, though."

Then, it added, its tone devoid of any emotion:

"Nor am I alive. I'm not even a human, really. Just a phantom of a lost shadow, conjured by the Spell. Ah, but this Estuary is a strange place. Time does not exist here, and so, everything exists here simultaneously. Even though you have already taken my role, here we are, having a chance to meet each other."

Sunny shivered.

Meeting his future self was already shocking enough, especially considering how terrifying the power of that version of him was. It felt no less oppressive, and even much more so, than the power of the Great Nightmare Creatures that had torn their way into the waking world during the Battle of the Black Skull.

But why was that guy hiding in the darkness?

Why wasn't he showing his face?

Come to think of it… why was Sunny unable to sense a human body anywhere in the shadows?

And what did his future version mean by saying that he was neither

human nor alive?

At this point, it was impossible to tell if the voice was lying or telling the truth. Whether he was wearing Weaver's Mask or not. All of it…

Left Sunny quite unsettled.

He cleared his throat.

"So… that's great, then. You can tell me everything about the future, how to deal with all my problems better, and how not to end up in the same sorry state as you."

The voice remained silent.

Sunny lingered.

"Right? Come on. Start talking."

There was no answer for a while.

Then, the voice said in a dark tone:

"I don't think I will. You know how it goes… knowledge of the future will just make that future happen faster, and all that. Haven't you been burned by trying to exploit Cas and her visions enough times already?"

The future version of Sunny laughed.

"Yeah, yeah. I know what you want to say. Frustrating, isn't it? I remember cursing my future self with all kinds of nasty words at that point, in my mind. No, it really is strange, to be that annoying future self now!"

His joyless laughter died down, and Sunny was once again surrounded by chilling silence.

After a few moments, the voice spoke again:

"It's of no use, anyway. Aren't you here to become banished from fate? If you do go further and your wish comes true… there's no

telling what your future will hold."

The voice grew harder to hear, as if the two of them were being slowly separated by a great distance.

"Still, I ask of you. Turn back. Do not go further. You… are not ready for what lies ahead."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

Eventually...

He scoffed.

"If you truly are the future version of myself, then you already know my answer."

Turn back? Abandon his chance of breaking the shackles of fate and the slave collar wrapped around his neck?

Never. He would rather die a thousand deaths.

"I refuse."

His voice was resolute.

There was a distant, dejected sigh.

Then, the voice resounded once again, barely audible:

"You stubborn fool… well, as expected. Go on, then. Hurry up! This Nightmare won't last much longer."

And just like that, the voice disappeared, leaving Sunny alone in the cave. The shadows embraced him again, and his ability to see in the dark returned.

'Damn traitors...'

The radiance of the Guiding Light pointed forward again.

He took a shaky breath, trying to compose himself.

"What… an insufferable bastard."

What was up with his future self and his attitude? Was it really necessary to laugh and chuckle at everything Sunny said? And did he really have to keep all the knowledge of what was about to come a secret?!

The voice did say one thing, though…

It was that the Nightmare was about to end.

Cursing under his breath, Sunny rushed forward.

'That guy... gave me the creeps. He was a bit scary, though. Which meant that I will be, too. That... is good news?

Right?'

He had no time to ponder that eerie conversation right now, and was in no mood to, either. There would be time for that later, but right now... his freedom awaited.

He crossed the cave and followed the Guiding Light into another tunnel, venturing deeper and deeper into the dark mountain.

And then, finally…

He reached its very heart.

Entering a dark cavern, Sunny stumbled and came to a halt.

The cavern was vast enough that he could not see its ceiling, its walls drowning in darkness. Its floor was covered in shallow water, and at a distance, a small island rose from the glossy surface.

There was a beautiful tree growing in the middle of the island. And, nestled beneath its branches…

Sunny's eyes widened.

'What? What is this… why?'

…An unadorned stone sarcophagus stood, its lid covered by withered

leaves.

Chapter-1579: Forgotten

Sunny had reached the very heart of the Estuary.

There, hidden in the depth of a towering mountain, a vast cavern was filled with darkness. A single ray of bright light fell from somewhere high above, illuminating a small island rising from the glossy black water.

There was a beautiful tree growing on the island, its leaves a sea of pale magenta. As the branches of the tree swayed slightly under the wind, the leaves fell down on the surface of the water, making its reflection ripple.

And in the shadow of those branches, a simple stone sarcophagus stood, its lid covered by withered leaves.

It made… for a vivid and breathtaking sight.

The heart of the Estuary was peaceful, like an island of safety and tranquility in a world full of nothing but dread. And yet… it was also poignant and mournful. As soon as Sunny entered the cavern, he felt a strange melancholy fill his heart, as though an echo of a great sorrow that had been experienced here by someone, sometime, still resided in this sacred and silent sanctuary.

He shifted slightly.

'Why… why is there a grave here?'

The great black pyramid was called the Tomb of Ariel, but it was not the place where the Demon of Dread had been buried. Instead, it was a place he had built to bury unbearable truths. So, it was not really a tomb.

…Or was it?

Sunny stared at the unadorned sarcophagus, struck silent by the overwhelming sorrow that remained here even now, thousands of years after the daemons and the gods were no more.

He knew that the Tomb of Ariel was not a burial place for someone because of the words the Demon of Dread had shared with Weaver. Ariel had said so himself — what he had buried here were the hideous truths he did not wish to remember.

But that was the thing. If Ariel did not remember what he had buried in this tomb of his, then didn't it mean that his words could not be trusted?

Who was to say that he had not buried someone precious here, and then chose to forget about his sorrow?

Suddenly, Sunny remembered the description of the Mirror of Truth. Weaver's strange words…

'I have not known that you've built a tomb, nor have I ever seen it. How would I know to admire it? I just happened to be here by chance. Now that I've seen it, my heart is untouched. I feel nothing.'

'You wanted to be free of the truth, so you didn't deserve it.'

Why did it feel… that although Ariel had forgotten his sorrow, Weaver remembered?

Had the Demon of Fate really happened to visit the Nightmare Desert and stumble upon the great pyramid by chance?

And if it was not a coincidence…

Then who was buried here, at the heart of Ariel's Tomb?

Forlorn, and forgotten.

Looking at the sarcophagus that rested under the branches of the beautiful tree, Sunny inhaled sharply.

'Oblivion. The answer… is Oblivion.'

The Tomb of Ariel was where the Demon of Oblivion had been buried by her brother. Somehow, he was sure of it.

Wasn't it sad, even for her death to be forgotten?

'Wait, no… no, that doesn't make any sense!'

Suddenly, Sunny was confused. How could Oblivion have been dead? Six daemons had risen in rebellion against the heavens, while the seventh — Weaver — refused. Because of that, the Demon of Fate had been despised and hunted both by the six daemons and the six gods.

If Oblivion had been dead all along, then how could there have been six daemons participating in the war and pursuing Weaver? Something… fundamentally did not make sense about all this.

And yet, Sunny could not shake off the feeling of certainty about who it was that had been buried in the heart of the Tomb of Ariel.

It was the Demon of Oblivion

'What does it mean?!'

Taken aback and awestruck, he winced and closed his eyes for a moment.

More importantly, what did it mean for him?

Cassie had said that he would gain freedom from fate if he reached the very heart of the Estuary. Well, here he was, at its innermost sanctum. Even if there was a grave of a daemon in front of him… how was it supposed to break the chains of fate that bound him?

Sunny hesitated for a while, feeling a sense of solemn awe at the sight of the peaceful grave. Then, he took a deep breath and took a step forward.

If he had any doubt that an unimaginable being was buried here, it disappeared as Sunny crossed the still expanse of dark water and approached the small island. The closer he got, the more sacred the silent cavern seemed, and the more pressure he felt.

Even in death, the being resting in the stone sarcophagus emanated enough of it to crush a mundane person and make their soul collapse. Sunny, meanwhile, was able to reach the island and step onto its soil, albeit with difficulty.

As the withered leaves rustled under his feet, he walked to the sarcophagus and stopped in front of it, looking at the weathered surface of the stone lid. Then, following an impulse, he raised a hand and cleaned it from fallen leaves.

There were no runes on the sarcophagus, no carvings. Nothing to indicate who was buried inside, as no mark left to remember them by. It was nestled between the roots of the ancient tree, as if they were growing through it... or from it.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny fell silent and listened to his intuition.

What was he supposed to do here?

His intuition… was telling him to look up.

He did just that, and noticed that one of the branches of the tree was hanging low, pulled down by the weight of a beautiful golden fruit. The fruit glistened as it basked in the light falling from the ceiling of the cavern.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then raised a hand and easily plucked the fruit off the branch.

His mind was in turmoil.

'Am I… really doing this?'

There was no answer. But he had already made it so far…

Letting out a sigh, Sunny brought the fruit to his mouth and sunk his teeth into its succulent flesh.

It was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted.

Without wasting any time, Sunny satisfied his hunger and quenched his thirst by consuming the mystical fruit. He did not know what to

expect, exactly, but felt that it would be like the fruits of the sacred tree growing on the deck of the Chain Breaker — which contained soul essence within them.

Granted, it could also be like fruits of the Soul Devourer, which contained soul fragments, as well as enthralled those consuming them with an insidious hex.

However, nothing of the sort happened. After finishing the divine fruit, Sunny received neither essence nor fragments. He was not enthralled, either.

Instead…

There was a strange feeling in the depths of his soul.

A chillingly familiar feeling.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Don't tell me…'

In the next moment, he let out a terrible shriek and fell on the lid of the sarcophagus.

Chapter-1580: What You Wished For

'Gods… oh gods…'

The pain… was exquisite.

It was inconceivable.

It was the kind of pain that could kill a person, or at least make them pass out in an instant. Sadly, the latter did not happen, because the pain was not physical.

Instead, its source was Sunny's soul, which was being altered and transformed.

Not in a way it had been changed every time a new core was formed, but rather in a way his blood and bones had been altered in the past.

"Aaargh!"

Sunny hit the lid of the sarcophagus with enough force to split his skin and fell to the ground, the carpet of leaves softening his fall.

'Wh—what… what the hell?! How… is… this possible?!'

He knew what was happening to him. However, he had no idea why it was happening, and how eating the golden fruit from the tree growing above the grave of Oblivion had caused it.

In any case, Sunny had no choice but to endure.

He wasn't shy about screaming and howling in pain, though, especially because there was no one here to witness his sorry state.

"D—damn it! Damn it! D…damn it all!"

After an eternity — this time, quite a literal one, considering that time did not exist in the Estuary — Sunny found himself laying on the ground, staring blindly at the beautiful crown of the mystical tree. His body felt weak, and his face was wet with tears.

'...Curses.'

That one was definitely going into the collection of the most horrendous agonies he had experienced. What place? Probably not the first, which was still held by activating the [Where is my eye?] enchantment of Weaver's Mask. But it was a confident second.

"Ah…"

Sunny groaned, and then shakily rose to his feet. Then, he took inventory of his soul.

It felt… different, somehow. And much, much more potent.

Already knowing what he would see, Sunny summoned the runes.

'It can't be… can it?'

But it could.

There, in the shimmering field of runes, a new string appeared in the list of his Attributes.

Pale as a ghost, Sunny read:

Attributes: [Fated], [Flame of Divinity], [Master of Shadows], [Blood Weave], [Bone Weave], [Marble Shell]...

And at the very end, a new one:

[...Soul Weave.]

He sucked in air, stunned.

'How the hell…'

Concentrating on the new string, he read the description:

Attribute Description: [You have inherited a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage. Your soul has been altered and imbued with stalwart potency.

A lonely demon shed tears standing above a forgotten grave. A tree grew from the ground where the demon's tears fell, and from it grew a wondrous fruit.]

Sunny stared at the runes for a while, then dismissed them and concentrated on his soul.

It felt… reinforced, somehow.

His essence felt much more potent, and the rate at which it replenished itself was much faster. The soul itself seemed more robust and durable, capable of withstanding a terrible amount of damage and maintaining its integrity even if large swathes of it were entirely destroyed.

Briefly diving into the soul sea, Sunny glanced at his six lightless cores. They did not look very different, at the surface, apart from the fact that the dark flames burning within them seemed even darker now, and more fierce.

However, once he peered into the depths of his cores… was he seeing things, or had he glimpsed a weave of ethereal golden strings creating a graceful pattern within the six black suns?

Sunny left the Soul Sea, both elated and perplexed.

'So… I inherited another part of Weaver's lineage. Soul Weave. That's great.'

It was, indeed, a remarkable boon.

'...But what the hell was it doing here?'

It was already shocking enough to find Oblivion's grave. But why was a fragment of Weaver's lineage left there? If anything, it should have been Oblivion's lineage… apart from the fact that no daemon except for the Demon of Fate had created one.

It was as though Weaver lost a part of his… her?... soul at the grave of Oblivion, for some reason. But why?

How had the two of them been connected?

And did it have something to do with the strange incongruity in the number of daemons that had participated in the Doom War?

Sunny did not know.

But all of it... was highly suspicious.

And it wasn't even the most pressing question.

'Yes, it's great that my soul has grown stronger…'

But where was his promised freedom? How was Soul Weave supposed to break the shackles of fate?

Sunny pursed his lips, unsure of what exactly was happening.

Had Cassie been wrong? Had she…

But then, something distracted him from these thoughts.

From the corner of his eye, Sunny noticed an ominous detail. Looking down, he stared at the Guiding Light, which had rolled away from him when he fell down, and was now laying to the side of the stone sarcophagus.

The crystal at the top of the sacred staff was still shining.

However, it wasn't pointing at the sarcophagus.

Instead, it was pointing into the darkness behind it.

Sunny slowly looked up… at that moment, it felt as though a ripple spread through the world. His surroundings suddenly felt less substantial, as if reality itself was slowly dissipating.

His eyes widened.

'The Nightmare… it's starting to collapse!'

Somewhere far away, Nephis must have delivered a fatal blow to the First Seeker.

But Sunny could not concentrate on that thought for too long.

Because just then, he noticed something moving in the darkness.

A hunched, towering shape that filled him with indescribable horror.

'H—how did I not notice… before…'

A giant creature had been hiding in the darkness of the vast cavern, hidden completely from his sight, his nose, and even his shadow sense, despite being the size of a hill. It had a hunched back, a disheveled mantle of messy black feathers, a terrifying beak, and mighty wings that were vast even when folded, hiding its gaunt body.

And a vile soul filled with more Corruption than he had ever seen, spreading outward from six grotesquely giant nodes.

'A… a Cursed Terror…'

Horrified, Sunny took an involuntary step back.

And just as he did, a pair of round, utterly insane eyes pierced him with a demented look.

A terrible pressure crashed into him, making it hard to breathe.

The Cursed Terror that had been hiding behind Oblivion's grave… was a giant, mad, and unmistakably vile bird.

'D—damnation!'

Sunny took a step back, but at the moment, the vile bird lunged forward, its demented eyes igniting with avarice and greed.

Before he could even react, he was drowned by its loathsome shadow.

And then, its talons plunged into his chest.

Sunny gasped.

However, the talons did not rip his flesh apart. Instead, they dove much deeper, finding their way into his very soul.

If he had time to enter the Soul Sea at that moment, he would have seen the shapeless form of the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn being snatched by the crooked talons.

And yet, they did not stop there.

Passing through Sunny's soul, the talons dug even deeper, into the depths of his being he had not even known existed.

And there, they grabbed onto something else.

Onto countless strings that were wrapped around him tightly, surrounding him like a chrysalis.

Or like the strings that held up a marionette.

Straining itself, the vile bird struggled for a few moments… and snatched those strings, too, somehow ripping them away from his existence.

Sunny opened his mouth, trying to scream, but no sound came out of his mouth.

There was another sound, though.

The voice of the Spell, whispering into his ear as the Nightmare collapsed around him:

[Your nightmare is… your… you nightmare is… is…]

It never finished speaking. Instead, the familiar voice broke and abruptly grew quiet, leaving him in utter, lonely, and terrifying silence.

'What… the hell… is h—happening?!'

And then, everything disappeared.

The heart of the Estuary was gone. The beautiful tree and the

sarcophagus resting beneath its branches were gone, too.

The harrowing bird plunging its talons into his chest was nowhere to be seen.

Sunny found himself in utter darkness.

…And then, he was expelled from that darkness.

Chapter-1581: Shadows and Dust

The Nightmare was over.

The illusory world that Spell had conjured had collapsed, expelling the surviving challengers.

They were supposed to find themselves in the empty void between dream and reality, where countless stars shimmered in the darkness, forming a vast and inconceivable pattern. There, the Spell was supposed to appraise their performance and let them go through the process of rising to a new Rank in peace.

However, that was not what happened to Sunny.

He had no time to comprehend the consequences of having his very existence pierced by the talons of the Cursed Terror when the Nightmare Collapsed, sending him into a world of darkness. There was no appraisal, and no pattern of stars shimmering in the void.

Instead, still reeling from the inconceivable and frightening turn of events, he was thrown out of the void, entering another, much smaller, but similarly dark space. In fact, he was violently catapulted into that space, crashing into a jagged piece of scorched concrete, shattering it, and colliding with a deformed alloy wall behind it.

The force of the impact was terrible enough to make the alloy crack, and for Sunny to lose consciousness.

And that…

Was how he became possibly the first human in history to Transcend while passed out.

The six shadows gathered around his reforged body, perplexed and dumbfounded.

After a while, one of them sighed, and then shook its head in utter dejection.

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The first thing Sunny felt was pain.

Not the terrible kind of pain he was sadly used to experiencing from time to time, but a more mundane pain. He was laying on a rough surface, something sharp biting into his back through the fabric of Ananke's Mantle.

The air was full of dust. The world was silent.

He was cold.

Groaning, he opened his eyes and sat up, feeling strangely refreshed and revitalized. Looking down, he saw jagged pieces of concrete littering the floor. No wonder he had been uncomfortable.

He stretched his hand, wishing to sweep a few of them away.

However, he must have misjudged his strength, because the concrete pieces simply turned to dust from his irritated swipe. More than that, the floor cracked under his palm, and the world shook, more dust spilling from somewhere above.

'Come to think of it…'

Where the hell was he?

Sunny shielded his eyes from the dust and looked around, trying to assess his surroundings.

It was rather strange.

At first, he thought that he had found himself in a small cave. It was a few meters in diameter, the ceiling just tall enough for him to stand up. There did not seem to be an entrance to the cave, and therefore,

no exit.

But after a few moments of contemplation, Sunny realized that the dusty pocket of space he had come to his senses in was not a natural cave. It looked more like the result of a cave-in.

The walls and the ceiling were a chaotic mess of cracked concrete and torn alloy, as if some building had collapsed on itself, forming a few pockets of empty space in the compressed ruin.

'Wait… alloy?'

As Sunny's eyes widened slightly, he concentrated on the details of his surroundings. Alloy and concrete, pieces of broken machinery, a torn piece of a sign written in human language.

His heart was beating wildly.

'I am… back in the waking world?'

Indeed, he was. The Nightmare had ended while the horrid bird was tearing his soul with its talons, and the Spell must have sent him back.

Not to the Nightmare Desert, but instead back to the point in the waking world where his tether had been placed.

…Which was supposed to be Valor's stronghold in one of the siege capitals of East Antarctica.

Sunny observed the scene of devastation around him for a while, his expression somber.

'Has the siege capital been destroyed?'

If so, it would explain why he was in a random pocket of empty space inside a ruin instead of his quarters in the comfortably furnished stronghold of a great clan.

Then, he was distracted by the feeling of cold air brushing against his chest. Looking down, at himself, Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What… the hell. Why am I naked?'

He was still covered by the nebulous folds of Ananke's Mantle, but the Shroud of Graceless Dusk was gone. Here and there, his pale skin was revealed, covered in dust.

Frowning, Sunny summoned the Shroud of Dusk.

However, nothing happened.

'What…'

Sunny called upon his Memory again, and yet there was no response. It was as if it did not exist anymore.

'Do I not have enough essence to summon even a single Memory?'

Sunny turned his attention to his soul, planning to assess how much essence he had left…

And froze.

'What, what the hell?!'

It was only then that he realized how vastly different his soul, his body, and the world itself were.

His body was suffused with power… such terrifying power that even Sunny himself felt a chill. It was already scary enough now, while he did not have his six shadows wrapped around him.

What would happen when he layered six consecutive augmentations on top of it?

His soul was filled with a cold ocean of essence, and that essence… it had already grown more potent after he had acquired Soul Weave. But now, it had become qualitatively different, possessing such depths and density as to appear inexhaustible. The intensity of power contained within it was frightening.

That was not the most shocking change, however.

The most shocking change… was that he could vaguely feel a different kind of energy all around him, cool and flowing, that was similar, but also different from the essence he was familiar with. That ambient essence seemed to belong to the world itself.

Or rather, to the shadows that surrounded him.

And since he was currently in total darkness, it was everywhere.

What really amazed him, though, was that the spirit essence flowed freely through him, wisps of it replenishing the missing shadow essence in his six cores. It was as if he was able to replenish his reserves of essence by borrowing the power of the world itself, as long as he was in his element.

'A stronger body, a qualitative change of essence, and an entirely new relationship between myself and the world…'

Sunny flinched.

"Wait. Have I… Transcended? I must have!"

His voice sounded hoarse in the utter silence.

Of course, he should have. He had conquered a Third Nightmare, after all.

Was he a Saint now?

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then feverishly summoned the runes.

But, just like the Shroud of Dusk…

The runes did not appear.

There was no response at all.

The Spell... was silent.

Chapter-1582: Banished

Sunny was paralyzed for a few moments.

He tried to summon the runes several more times, but there was no result. The Spell did not respond to him, as though he was not one of its carriers at all. A part of him that had long become integral was simply gone.

The shock Sunny experienced at that moment was hard to describe.

After a while, he tried to calm his wildly beating heart and think things through.

'Calm down. Calm down. This is not the first time something like that happened…'

He had been cut off from the Spell once before, in the Red Colosseum. Back then, it was the result of Solvane's zealots using Hope's own sorcery to prevent the sacrificial slaves from escaping.

But there was no enchanted collar around his neck right now. And he was in the waking world, not inside an ancient theater built by a daemon.

More than that… the absence of the Spell felt much more profound this time, somehow.

In fact, as he concentrated on himself, he realized that he felt rather strange. Something else felt absent from the world.

The world was subtly unfamiliar.

Trying not to panic, Sunny slowly assessed his abilities.

His shadow sense was still with him. So were the other facets inherent to his Aspect. His Abilities, his Attributes — those of them

the existence of which he could prove without the runes, at least — and his Aspect Legacy did not disappear.

His Flaw was also present. He had learned that by trying to tell a lie aloud, despite the fact that it hurt like hell.

His six shadows were observing his actions with varying reactions, all present. Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare could also be summoned.

However, he could not summon the runes. Neither could he dive into his Soul Sea to take a look at his Memories.

And the Memories…

Most of them were gone.

After trying to summon every Memory in his soul arsenal, Sunny realized that only a few of them remained.

They were Silver Bell, Puppeteer's Shroud, Extraordinary Rock, Endless Spring, Weaver's Mask, Covetous Coffer, Shadow Lantern, Shadow Chair, Overpriced Saddle, Weaver's Needle, and Ananke's Mantle.

The Midnight Shard, Dark Wing, Moonlight Shard, Autumn Leaf, Cruel Sight, Heavenly Burden, Memory of Fire, Memory of Ice, Strike of Thunder, Morgan's Warbow, Bone Singer, Dying Wish, Bitter Cusp, Stifled Scream, Essence Pearl, Nimble Catch, Shroud of Graceless Dusk, and Crown of Twilight were gone.

He felt a chill running down his spine.

As a Saint, he did not really need to protect himself from the elements with clothes, but it was still uncomfortable not to wear anything underneath his cloak. Sunny manifested the Marble Mantle and grabbed his head.

He quickly realized the pattern in which some of his Memories remained while others seemed to have been destroyed.

The Memories he could still summon were those that had been either personally created or modified by him, as well as his two Divine

Memories — Weaver's Mask and Shadow Lantern.

The rest of them were gone, which brought him almost physical pain.

'M—my… my Memories!'

Sunny almost spat blood.

The pain of losing most of his soul arsenal... the precious Memories he had spent years gathering... hurt almost as much as receiving Soul Weave had.

Sunny felt as if he had received a terrible blow.

After he had some time to come to terms with the unforgiving reality, he leaned on the cracked alloy wall and stared into the darkness with an empty gaze.

After a while, Sunny had to admit it.

'I am banished from the Nightmare Spell.'

The damned bird had done something to him, resulting in such an impossible thing happening. Which meant… what?

That he was free from the Spell's tyranny?

It also meant that every tool and assistance it provided to the Awakened would not be accessible to him anymore. No more receiving Memories and Echoes from the slain enemies. No more runes that conveniently described and categorized the world. No more guidance and support in the perilous undertaking of walking the path of Ascension, tyrannical as it might have been.

No more Nightmares… and no more shortcuts to higher Ranks.

The scale of this tectonic change was too vast to comprehend. His life, for better or worse, would be entirely different from now on. Sunny was sure that he would be discovering the consequences of not being a carrier of the Nightmare Spell for a long, long time.

'How the hell did the future me reach further than Transcendence?'

And speaking about not being infected by the Spell and Transcendence…

Without the helpful runes, Sunny did not even know what his Transformation Ability was.

Come to think about it, now that he was a Saint, there were more new things he was supposed to be able to do. Awakened traveled to the Dream Realm when they slept, while Masters could do it at any time… they still needed a Gateway to come back, though.

Saints, however, were akin to miniature Gateways themselves. They were supposed to come and go between the two worlds as they pleased, and could even bring other living beings with them — although that last part was very limited.

So… how was he supposed to learn to do so without the Spell? Although its help was subtle, it did help Awakened learn their innate abilities by making them instinctual. Controlling essence, using Memories, placing tethers in the waking world, and many other things — the subconscious knowledge of how to accomplish all these feats was placed in the heads of the Awakened by the Spell.

Sunny did not have such a luxury anymore.

'I should still be able to sense how to use my Transformation Ability, at least.'

He looked around, evaluating the small pocket of dusty space. What would happen if his Transcendent Form was truly giant? Would he break through the debris, or cause a collapse and bury himself?

Most likely, it would simply not work if there was not enough space.

He was still curious to try, though.

Sunny looked at his six shadows and asked:

"What do you think? Should I?"

Surrounding Sunny in a semicircle, they stared at him silently. Happy shrugged without confidence.

Sunny chuckled wistfully.

"Come on. I am a Saint now… can you believe it? After all the crap I went through to get to this point… it would be a shame not to try."

He searched within his soul, hoping to find something new and unfamiliar.

It was an extremely strange thing, to explore his own self blindly.

However, one's Aspect was their own, existing outside of the Spell. And so, after some time passed, Sunny did sense it… a new kind of power slumbering deep within him, waiting to be called upon.

It was similar to how he sensed his other Abilities, but also different.

'This is how I Transform, I guess.'

Sunny took a deep breath… and then activated his Transformation Ability.

He had expected his body to balloon and change shape.

But nothing happened.

There was a considerable pull on his essence, but apart from that, he did not seem to change at all.

Sunny frowned.

'What the hell?'

Somewhat unsettled, he looked at his shadows and said:

"Why isn't it…"

But then, the words died on his lips.

The shadows... were gone.

Instead, six identical versions of him were sitting in a semicircle around him, all clad in fearsome onyx armor, staring at him with confused expressions.

Chapter-1583: Shadow Avatars

Sunny found himself surrounded by six identical versions of himself, all staring at him with confused expressions. Alabaster skin, raven-black hair, eyes that were like glistening onyx… all of them were clad in full suits of fearsome onyx armor, as well, its design both intricate and impregnable.

He stared at them back.

For a moment, Sunny was scared.

And who could blame him? He had just managed to rid himself of the Sin of Solace, avoided being consumed by the Mad Prince, and survived a meeting with his frightening future self — each a version of him.

But… no.

None of the three were among the six copies that were sitting around him in a semicircle. In fact, the six impostors looked strangely familiar. And not just because they looked exactly like him.

Rather, they were like versions of Sunny that each possessed a distinct personality, which subtly changed how they looked.

One was sullen. Another was joyful. One was deadpan and unsettling, while the one next to him was arrogant and disdainful. The fifth copy seemed mischievous, while the last one looked like a complete lunatic.

They were… his shadows.

Sunny felt like pinching himself.

"Hey, you guys… what, uh… what are you doing?"

Six identical copies of him glanced at each other, then shrugged in unison.

"That's not helping!"

When it became clear that none of them were going to explain himself, Sunny shook his head in bewilderment.

So… this was his Transformation Ability?

'Come to think of it. It makes sense?'

Transformation Abilities were varied. Some were more unique, while most allowed Saints to assume the shape of powerful beasts. Sunny had expected to become a giant beast, as well, but then again… wasn't he already capable of that?

His mastery of Shadow Shell allowed him to assume the form of all manner of creatures, provided he knew how. Serpents, leopards, and winged horrors... as long as Sunny studied someone for a bit, he could grasp the essence of their being through Shadow Dance and recreate it through Shadow Manifestation.

Of course, that transformation was purely physical, and did not grant him the mystical powers of the beings whose forms he used. In that regard, Shadow Shell was a lesser version of a true Transformation Ability. But it was still an immensely powerful tool, and much more versatile than almost any such Ability could be.

It was reasonable, then, that his Transformation would have nothing to do with his body.

Instead, it had to do with the invaluable helpers that followed him around.

His shadows.

The new Ability transformed them into perfect copies of Sunny, which was different from simply making them tangible through Shadow Manifestation. If simply made tangible, the shadows were fragile and vulnerable, exposing his soul to lethal damage.

These… shadow avatars, however, were just as strong and durable as Sunny's own body was. That much was already apparent — he could see the proof himself.

That proof was the Marble Mantle… no. It would be the Onyx Mantle now, wouldn't it? Its [Bound] trait was supposed to make it as strong as his soul was. Since Sunny was Transcendent now, the Mantle would have risen to a new Rank, as well.

In any case, the Mantle was a manifestation of the Onyx Shell Attribute. And since each of the shadows was clad in the fearsome armor, they seemed to possess the same Attribute.

Which meant that they possessed the rest of his Attributes, too. [Master of Shadows], [Flame of Divinity], [Onyx Shell]… and the three Weaves: [Blood Weave], [Bone Weave], and [Soul Weave].

[Fated], meanwhile… was up in the air. Sunny was not sure if he even had such an Attribute anymore.

He took a deep breath.

Since the shadow avatars possessed his Attributes, they were just as resilient and durable as him. The Weaves granted them strength and made their bodies exceedingly tenacious, while the Onyx Shell granted them protection against all kinds of attacks, as well as a handful of extremely useful traits.

So, they were just as robust as him.

But were they as powerful? What, exactly, could they do?

Sunny hesitated for a moment, and then decided to find out just that.

He could still perceive the world through the shadows. Now that Sunny composed himself, he could give them a few simple commands to see what they were capable of while manifested through his Transcendent Ability. He concentrated on the gloomy version of himself.

Sunny was about to open his mouth to give the command, but at that moment, something strange happened, making him fall silent.

As he concentrated on the shadow and its perception… it was as though their connection deepened, and changed.

Sunny was still looking at the sullen version of himself, and in turn looking at himself through the eyes of the sullen shadow, but it felt entirely different.

It was as though he was not just perceiving himself from outside his body, but actually… had two bodies.

Startled, Sunny flinched back.

At the same time, his second body flinched back, too, and he felt himself flinching back twice.

He opened his mouth:

"What the hell?!"

"What the hell?!"

His second body cried out, as well, two identical voices breaking the silence of the dusty pocket of space at the same time.

Sunny froze, looking at himself… and at the same time, his other body also froze, looking at himself.

He felt the cracked floor under his hands, and shards of concrete under his other hands.

Sunny raised his left hand and waved at himself, simultaneously raising his other left hand to wave at himself.

'How... weird!'

It was indeed as if there were two of him. He could not only perceive the world through the shadow avatar, but also control it as he would his own body.

As his eyes suddenly glistened with burning intensity, Sunny concentrated.

In the next moment, his own body waved its left hand again, while the shadow avatar waved its right.

'Complete independence…'

Throwing a glance at the other five copies of himself, Sunny gritted his teeth.

Then… each of the seven identical young men trapped in the ruins performed a separate action.

One rose to his feet. Another lowered himself to the floor. One turned his head to the left, while the one next to him turned his head to the right. The fifth closed his eyes, the sixth pressed his hands against his ears.

The last one covered his mouth with a hand.

Seven stunned gasps resounded at the same time, one of them slightly muffled.

The first Sunny — the original Sunny — swayed a little.

Controlling seven bodies at the same time put a lot of pressure on his mind… but it was not nearly as burdensome as almost anyone else would have found it. Sunny was perfectly accustomed to perceiving the world from multiple points of view, after all, so although it took some adjustment to exist in seven places at the same time, he was more than capable of managing it.

It was going to take some time to get used to it… but Sunny had no doubt.

One day, soon, he would be able to wield his six shadow avatars into battle.

Which meant that, instead of becoming a Saint…

Sunny had become seven Saints.

Chapter-1584: Sevenfold

After calming down a little, Sunny conducted a few simple experiments to figure out what exactly his shadow avatars were capable of.

The results… left him a bit breathless.

The most important thing about his Transformation Ability was that the manifested shadows were, indeed, no different from himself.

They possessed the exact same body and the exact same Attributes. More than that, they were just as powerful as Sunny — meaning, each of the six avatars was as fast, strong, and resilient as a Transcendent Terror.

But that was not all.

Not only did they possess the same power as him, they could also use the same Abilities as him. Meaning that all six avatars could independently use Shadow Control, Shadow Step, and Shadow Manifestation.

They could also summon his Shadows, wield the Memories he possessed, and weave strings of shadow essence. Most frighteningly of all… each of them could form their own Shadow Shells.

Even though maintaining several shells at the same time almost made Sunny pass out, he could theoretically turn each of his avatars into a different kind of terrifying creature.

There were two things Sunny and his shadow avatars shared, though.

The first one was rather obvious — it was his mind. The shadow avatars could act independently, following his commands to the best of their ability. But when he took direct control of their bodies, it was

not as though he suddenly had several consciousnesses. Rather, his sole consciousness controlled many bodies, and, therefore, took on the corresponding burden.

A weird quirk of that situation was that the shadows refused to speak unless the body was directly controlled by him, despite being physically able to. Whether it was an external limitation or simply not in their nature, he did not know. In any case, that meant that his Flaw prohibited him from lying even through the mouths of the avatars.

The second thing Sunny shared with his avatars was his soul. That was why they were able to summon his Shadows and his Memories… that was also why all seven of them shared the same pool of shadow essence.

Maintaining the avatars already cost him a considerable amount of essence. If all of them went around using powerful enchantments and activating their Abilities simultaneously… the result would be truly cataclysmic, without a doubt, but also short-lived.

If Ascended Sunny possessed this Transformation Ability, he would have been forced to only use it to deliver short bursts of truly devastating damage or short periods of incredible utility.

However, Sunny was not Ascended anymore. His Transcendent soul was full of frighteningly potent essence now, and could passively replenish it with spirit essence when in the embrace of shadows, to boot. Just as important was the fact… that he had Soul Weave.

Soul Weave entirely changed the potential of his Transformation Ability. With it reinforcing his soul, Sunny could summon the full wrath of his avatars for much longer.

Beside that, he could also sustain a few of them permanently without losing any essence. The natural rate at which it was expended and replenished now made it so that he did not need to dismiss at least a couple of his avatars at all.

Which meant that he was one of those exceedingly rare, freakish Saints who could maintain their Transformation indefinitely.

There was another important piece of information in that latest discovery, too. It was that he did not need to Transform all of his shadows at the same time. He could make some into avatars while keeping the rest in their natural form.

Those shadows that remained in their natural form, then, could augment either him or the manifested avatars. The proportion could be whatever he desired — he could augment himself with all six shadows, manifest an avatar and augment it with the remaining five shadows, share the augmentation between himself and the avatar, do the same with two avatars, and so on.

In short, it was a supremely flexible and adaptable Ability. Sunny could shift freely between being a single source of overwhelming power or several sources of slightly less unreasonable might.

…With his Shadows added into the mix, the amount of strategies he could come up with grew even more varied.

In short…

'It's ridiculous.'

The amount of power and flexibility that Sunny now commanded was nothing short of daunting. He was already slightly frightened by his Transcendent might… now that there could be seven of him, that feeling only grew more intense.

Sunny had always held a lot of respect for Saints, but now that he was a Saint himself — and one of the most powerful Saints in existence, no less — he truly understood why each of them was a singular existence among the Awakened.

Granted… there were some limitations to his newfound power. The burden on his mind and reserves of shadow essence was one of them, obviously.

The need to arm each of the avatars with suitable equipment was another. They might all be wearing the Onyx Mantle, but that was simply because it was a manifestation of his Attribute. If he summoned a powerful Memory weapon, six copies of it would not

magically appear in the hands of the avatars — there would be only one.

…Which was a moot point, for the moment. Sunny did not even have a Memory weapon right now, let alone a powerful one.

'How the mighty have fallen…'

He spent a moment in bitter silence, shocked at the fact.

And, by thinking about it, Sunny had to face some other facts.

Now that he had conducted the exploration of his new abilities — an initial exploration, at least — he had no choice but to turn his mind to other matters.

Much more frightening matters than his Transcendent power was.

What had happened at the end of the Nightmare? What had that Cursed Terror… whose identity was rather obvious… done to him? Was his fate really broken, and was he free?

What had happened with the other members of the cohort in Verge? Were all of them alright?

…What had happened to Antarctica after the Battle of the Black Skull?

Now that Sunny was back in the waking world, there was no escaping finding the answers to all these questions.

He looked at his six identical, but distinct avatars.

After a few moments of silence, Sunny asked:

"Shall we… go take a look?"

Just as expected, he was met with silence. The shadows seemed to be looking at him with expressions of support, though, each in its own way.

Sunny took a deep breath and then looked up, at the unstable ceiling

of the pocket of space inside a ruin that he had found himself in.

"...Let's climb out of this concrete tomb, then."

Chapter-1585: Climbing Out of a Grave

Sunny looked at the ceiling, extending his shadow sense upward. At the same time, he allowed his mind to drift back to the very end of the Nightmare.

…And what a Nightmare it had been.

Sunny did not know how long he had spent wandering the dreadful currents of the Great River, trying to escape the Tomb of Ariel. The last cycle had taken… how long was it? Close to a year? And that was only his subjective time. For some people, like Cassie and Mordret, it had lasted for much longer.

But that was only the final of the countless cycles. So, he could not even guess how long of a journey it had been.

What he did know, however, was that it ended in the very heart of the Estuary, past the silent lake where Ariel's heretical testament had been inscribed. Near the forgotten grave of the Demon of Oblivion…

Where a Cursed Terror had been waiting for him, hidden in the darkness.

That Terror…

Sunny was more or less sure who it was.

'The loathsome Thieving Bird, hated both by the gods and the beings of the Void…'

It was the thieving miscreant who had stolen one of Weaver's eyes, and whose spawn he had slain on the Forgotten Shore, thus receiving the [Drop of Ichor] and Weaver's lineage.

That single event had started the chain of falling dominoes that intertwined his fate with the nebulous Demon, as well as the rest of the daemons and the dead gods.

Wasn't it very ironic, then, that the Thieving Bird would be the one to break that fate?

And Sunny… was pretty sure that that was exactly what the vile thing had done.

The moment the Thieving Bird's talons plunged into his chest, he felt it taking something from his soul. But then… he vaguely sensed it taking something else, from somewhere that lay even deeper.

It was a hard thing to describe. Even now, Sunny felt somehow different, in addition to all the changes caused by the Transcendence. It was as though a burden he did not even know he was carrying had been lifted, making him feel both unburdened and scarily untethered.

Had the Vile Thieving Bird stolen… his fate?

That would certainly be one way — an indescribably bewildering and roundabout way — for Cassie's promise that he would gain freedom in the Estuary to come true. It would also explain whose True Name Torment had delivered to the blind seer at the cost of her life.

But what did it mean, exactly, for his fate to be stolen?

Did it even work? Did he lose the [Fated] Attribute? Was he really free?

What about Shadow Bond? He had been banished from the Nightmare Spell as a result of losing his fate… would his mystical connection to Nephis be severed, as well?

Sunny frowned, knowing that he would find out soon.

'One thing is certain, though…'

If the Nightmare had not ended at just the right moment, he would have certainly been killed. Sunny could justifiably be proud of his power and prowess, but he was a mere ant in front of a Cursed

Terror... and a very special Cursed Terror at that. If even Weaver had fallen victim to the vile Thieving Bird, what hope did he have to resist it?

'What was that thing even doing in the burial chamber? Why did it enter the Tomb of Ariel? And how did it get past the guardian of the lake?'

The last question was the easiest to answer. The vile thing had even been able to steal from the Demon of Fate, so bypassing a guardian left behind by Ariel would certainly have been easy for it.

As for the other two…

A piece of Weaver's soul had been left in the heart of Ariel's Tomb. Perhaps the Thieving Bird had become obsessed with the Demon of Fate? The description of the [Drop of Ichor] said that it had been enamored by Weaver's beautiful eyes, after all. Not to mention that it had gone mad after witnessing the reflection of the Void frozen in Weaver's pupil.

Had it stolen Sunny's fate because it was connected to the enigmatic daemon?

If so, it would have probably taken his body and soul, as well, given the chance. He had inherited three parts of Weaver's lineage, after all.

'Was the Nightmare ending just at the right moment simple luck, or the last gift from [Fated]?'

Sunny did not know. Nor did he care, really.

If he was truly free from that damned Attribute, he would rather never remember that it had ever existed at all.

'Let's go.'

He had already extended his shadow sense as far as he could — which was much further than before, now that he was a Saint. Sadly, all he could feel was a mess of compressed concrete and alloy for dozens of meters above. That was only logical, considering that Valor's stronghold in Antarctica had been largely built underground.

He was, more or less, buried alive.

'Figures…'

Still, there was no reason to worry. Sunny could not simply use Shadow Step to reach the surface, but he was more than strong enough to burrow through the ruins — mundane concrete and alloy could not stop a Saint.

However, there was a simpler method.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then dismissed his avatars and wrapped the shadows around his body. Then, he dissolved into the darkness, becoming a shadow himself.

The collapsed stronghold was not a monolith. Even after it crumbled, there was plenty of space left between the debris — perhaps not enough to accommodate a human body, but more than enough for a formless shadow to slip through.

Gliding up the wall, Sunny slid into a thin crack between two concrete plates and slithered upward for a few meters, eventually reaching a dead end where the debris was compressed too tightly, leaving no gaps. There, he simply used shadow sense to locate another tiny pocket of empty space nearby and teleported to it, still maintaining the form of a shadow.

Just like that, he ascended higher and higher, slowly approaching the surface. In the process, Sunny discovered something remarkable.

Now that he could absorb the ambient essence while in the embrace of shadows, the rate at which his own essence was being consumed to keep himself intangible was lower than the rate at which it was being replenished. In other words, Sunny could remain in the form of a shadow indefinitely now, for as long as he stayed away from bright light and true darkness.

'Amazing…'

Eventually, he reached another large pocket of space and temporarily assumed corporeal form to look around.

By some luck, the level of destruction was much lower here, enough so that there were mostly intact pieces of furniture strewn around the floor, covered in dust. Sunny observed the dark, claustrophobic space for a few moments, then took a step forward and bent down, fishing out a small device from under the dust.

It was a standard-issue military communicator, its screen cracked. Nevertheless, the communicator was still working — when Sunny picked it up, the broken screen lit up, revealing a fragmented image.

The thing seemed to be malfunctioning, but he could still make out what he needed — the time and date.

Staring at the blinking screen, Sunny opened his eyes wide.

'...Huh.'

According to the broken communicator…

Today was roughly a week since the disastrous Battle of the Black Skull.

Considering the time the members of the cohort had spent traversing the harrowing desert, the Spell sent them back to the exact moment they had entered the Seed of Nightmare.

While they were wandering the dreadful depths of the Tomb of Ariel, time stood still in the waking world.

Chapter-1586: Grey Sky

Sunny let out a long sigh and tossed the broken communicator away.

'I see.'

He felt a strange mix of profound relief and tense apprehension.

The reason for being relieved was obvious. Sunny did not know how many cycles it had taken them to conquer the Nightmare, but from what he had seen in the Estuary, it was at least thousands. Therefore, he had been secretly afraid to return to the waking world only to find out that humans there had gone extinct thousands of years ago.

That Rain, and everyone else he knew, were long gone.

Alternatively, the strange nature of the Great River could have resulted in them leaving the Nightmare in the time corresponding to where they were in relation to the Estuary — namely, in the Age of Gods. Which would have been terrible in its own right.

So, the fact that their Third Nightmare had taken no time at all, from the point of view of the waking world, was one of the best possible outcomes.

However…

It also meant that Sunny and the other members of the cohort had been sent to a continent where an unknown number of Great horrors were currently roaming freely.

Now that they were Saints… did they stand a chance in a battle against the terrifying creatures that had entered the waking world during the Battle of the Black Skull?

That was the reason Sunny felt tense.

'I wonder if we'll meet Skinwalker again…'

He smiled somberly, and then dissolved into shadows once more.

'At least I didn't miss years of Rain's life.'

Encouraging himself like that, Sunny continued slithering through the ruins.

After a while…

He finally reached the surface.

Sunny found himself on the slope of a vast crater, under a stormy grey sky. Even though the situation was more than a little ominous, he suddenly felt a strange sense of comfort.

It was a privilege many people never thought about, to have a familiar sky above their heads. To be home.

Without wasting any time, Sunny scaled the slope and escaped the embrace of shadows at the top of the tall mound formed by the crater. Standing there, he looked around, at what he had expected to be the ruins of an obliterated siege capital.

To his surprise...

The siege capital did not look particularly obliterated.

Sure, there were signs of destruction here and there, with a few buildings having collapsed… but Valor's stronghold seemed to have sustained the worst damage. Most of the city was still intact, and there were crowds of people moving through the streets in an orderly manner, escorted by the soldiers.

As Sunny assessed this scene, two details attracted his attention…

Both shaking him to the very core.

The first one was near the center of the city, where a large park sprawled. There… a giant Gate pierced the sky, dwarfing the tallest building in the siege capital. It was like a vertical fracture in the

fabric of the world, instilling him with terror.

'Here, too? But why…'

Then, he noticed that there was something strange about the giant Gate.

It was entirely, utterly wrong.

Usually, the Gates looked like tears in reality, revealing nothing but vile darkness in their depths. But this one was different. Not only did Sunny not feel an instinctive revulsion toward the strange Gate, but there was also no darkness within it.

Instead, he could see to the other side.

There, clearly visible through the fracture of the Gate, a beautiful lake sparkled under bright sunlight. And from that lake... rose a magnificent castle.

It was Bastion.

Sunny was still struggling to comprehend that stunning sight when he noticed something else. There was an orderly column of refugees slowly entering the Gate.

He shuddered.

'That… that is impossible…'

A Nightmare Gate was not something one could enter. It was a door that only opened one way — from the Dream Realm into the waking world. Therefore, anyone trying to pass through a Gate from that side was destined to fail. More than that, approaching a Gate was lethal… Sunny had briefly brushed against one himself, in Falcon Scott, and it was a memory he did not wish to revisit.

So how could countless refugees be passing through the strange Nightmare Gate?

Was it even a Nightmare Gate? Or something else entirely?

The answers to these questions were, perhaps, connected to the second detail Sunny had been stunned to see.

And that one… was far more chilling.

Out there, far away from him, the great wall of the siege capital stood, broken and torn. Long spans of it had collapsed, and beyond them, a mountain of black flesh was rolling across the plain, devouring everything in sight.

There were no soldiers, no Awakened, and no lumbering MWPs on top of the damaged wall.

However, there was a single human there, facing the Great horror with indifferent resolve.

From that distance, Sunny couldn't see who it was, exactly. All he could tell was that it was a man. The man was tall, with broad shoulders, his posture as straight and sharp as a steel sword. A long vermilion cloak fluttered in the wind behind his back.

The man did not move, but the stormy clouds seemed to follow his will, flowing across the sky. A rustling haze connected the clouds with the crawling mountain of black flesh, as if rain was falling from the sky.

That rustle…

Sunny looked up, at the clouds that obscured the heavens like a grey veil.

'N—no... it can't be...'

It was only then that he understood that they were no clouds at all.

Instead, they were countless flying swords, enough of them to form a storm front, all moving with clear and hypnotizing, lethal intent.

The haze he saw in the distance was not rain, but thousands of swords falling on the colossal abomination like a bombardment of slaying steel, shredding and slicing its profane flesh apart.

Sunny paled, forgetting to breathe.

He suddenly realized who the man facing the Great horror was, what the strange Gate was, and why the siege capital had not been destroyed yet.

...The King of Swords had descended into the waking world.

And with him, the harrowing might of a Sovereign's Domain had descended, as well.

Chapter-1587: Dream Gate

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, staring at the distant figure wearing a bright vermilion cloak.

The clouds veiling the sky were not clouds, but a myriad of flying swords. The man standing on the ruined wall of the siege capital was not a mere mortal, but a Sovereign.

One of the three Supreme humans in existence…

Anvil of Valor, the King of Swords.

The Sovereign was facing a Great Titan. Sunny recognized that harrowing creature from the Battle of the Black Skull, where it had decimated the armies of both Valor and Song. The Titan was vast and abominable, its power inconceivable…

But the King of Swords was no less terrifying.

He was more like a force of nature than a human being, a walking cataclysm that tolerated no defiance. Where Anvil stood, his will was the law. Wherever his sword pointed was his kingdom.

And within the borders of his kingdom, his authority was absolute.

Whoever dared to disobey would be obliterated by a flood of slaying swords.

Sunny took a stifled breath.

'Crazy… it's crazy.'

That was what Nephis wanted to fight against?

He slowly shook his head and forced himself to look away from the awesome visage of the rain of swords. If each of them was infused

with the power of a Supreme being… then Anvil was much more powerful than Sunny had ever imagined.

Considering that he was effortlessly controlling enough swords to cover the entire sky, this whole siege capital could be destroyed by the tyrannical Sovereign in a matter of seconds. There was no one in the waking world strong enough to stop him.

Well… except for the other two. Ki Song and Asterion.

'Are they here, in Antarctica, as well?'

Sunny wondered. The Queen of Worms had to have descended, too. As for the most mysterious of the Sovereigns, who knew? His ways were inscrutable.

Finally, his gaze settled on the titanic Gate.

A Nightmare Gate… no, not quite.

A Dream Gate.

Something clicked in his mind, and Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

'Of course. It makes sense…'

Sunny had been wary of the Sovereigns for many years, but he did not really know a lot about them — and about their power. What did it mean, exactly, to be Supreme? He had learned that the Sovereigns possessed a unique ability to create, rule, and expand their Domains. Even this piece of information was vague and shallow at best.

However, that was not what Sunny was currently thinking about.

Rather, he was thinking about a more subtle characteristic of those carrying the Nightmare Spell.

Awakened traveled to the Dream Realm when they slept. Masters could enter it at will and physically, leaving a tether behind. Saints were like miniature Gateways, able to come and go between the two worlds as they pleased, and even carry people with them.

What about the Sovereigns, then? How did this facet of their power evolve when they rose to the Supreme Rank?

Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that theirs would be a continuation of the power that all Saints possessed? That they would not only contain a Gateway within themselves, but would actually be capable of creating a stable external bridge between the two worlds?

The opposite of a Nightmare Gate. Nightmare Gates allowed abominations to leave the Dream Realm and enter the waking world. A Dream Gate, then, would allow living beings to enter the Dream Realm from this side.

'...He is evacuating civilians.'

Indeed, that was what the King of Swords was doing. The Evacuation Army had spent close to a year ferrying refugees over the dreadful expanse of the ocean to other Quadrants. The process was slow — after all, the seafaring alloy behemoths could accommodate only so many people, and it took them more than a month to make a round trip.

Not to mention all the dangers that the naval convoys faced at sea.

The government had evacuated as many refugees as they could, and the operation would have probably ended in a semblance of success… if not for the three Category Four Gates that had opened during the Battle of the Black Skull.

With the Great Nightmare Creatures roaming East Antarctica, there was no hope of anyone surviving — the civilian population, the Evacuation Army, the small contingents of Legacy Awakened… all of them were destined to die.

East Antarctica would have ended up the same way the Antarctic Center had, with everyone who was not already evacuated perishing in the flood of abominations.

And so, the two Sovereigns must have descended, holding back the Great horrors and opening a new, much more efficient path to salvation. The Dream Gates.

Perhaps it was because they could not allow their children — Morgan, Seishan, Beastmaster, and Silent Stalker — to die.

Perhaps it was because Mordret had been right, and the Sovereigns could not abandon humanity that easily. The new world they were building in the Dream Realm had to be populated by someone, after all, and hundreds of millions of refugees with nowhere else to go were the perfect fuel for strengthening their domains and nurturing more Awakened.

In any case, here it was.

Antarctica's salvation.

Sunny felt both incredibly relieved and indescribably bitter as he looked at the towering Dream Gate. Relieved because his worst fears had not come true, and his mission… the Evacuation Army's mission… was not doomed to fail. All the sacrifices that he and his soldiers had made were not in vain.

At the same time, he felt incredibly bitter because the unexpected salvation had come from those whom he despised the most — the Great Clans, whose conceited indifference created this terrible situation, in the first place.

If only they had moved sooner… if only they had not wasted so much time secretly fighting each other instead of preventing the Chain of Nightmares from claiming countless lives.

He could already see the mighty propaganda machine spinning its wheels, burying the truth in the clamor of triumphant fanfares. Look at the noble heroes of the Legacy Clans, who had selflessly come to the rescue of the Southern Quadrant in its darkest moment! Just like these faithful guardians of humanity always did.

Come to think of it, the Sovereigns had finally chosen to reveal their existence. That would also be spun into a fitting tale, no doubt. Probably something about the champions of the two great clans rushing to conquer the Fourth Nightmare in order to assist the people of Antarctica. That would also explain why they had been so late to offer genuine support.

They had not been tardy at all, but had instead been risking their lives in a Nightmare.

A dark expression appeared on Sunny's face.

'Ah. I hate it.'

But at the same time, he couldn't hate it. As long as people were saved, did the hypocrisy of the Sovereigns really matter?

Of course, he still had many questions. Would all these refugees be infected by the Nightmare Spell as soon as they entered the Dream Realm? What were the limitations that made it difficult for the Sovereigns to enter the waking world, and how had they bypassed these limitations to appear in Antarctica?

How would the world change now that the existence of the Supremes was revealed, and millions of mundane people crossed over to the Dream Realm?

And so on.

Well… he could take his time finding the answers to all these questions.

For now, the situation did not seem critical. With Anvil holding down the fort, the siege capital was not on the verge of being destroyed. Judging by how orderly the soldiers and the civilians were moving, the situation was under control, or at least not critical. Therefore, Sunny's first priority was to find the members of the cohort.

Since he had been sent back to where his tether had been placed in the waking world, the rest of them would be, too. Which meant that Mordret and Jet had been sent to the siege capital controlled by Song, while Effie and Kai had been sent to the Evacuation Army headquarters.

Nephis and Cassie, though, were supposed to be right here. Probably somewhere in the same ruins he had just crawled from.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny looked around, studying the crater.

It was then that he was thrown to the ground, and a massive explosion tore the center of the crater apart.

Chapter-1588: Unchained

The ground shook, and some parts of the crater's slope collapsed. Sunny, who was standing on the edge of its mound, lost his balance and rolled down, dirt and pieces of debris raining on him from above.

'Ouch.'

Coming to a halt much further down the slope than he had been before, he could not see the Dream Gate and the King of Swords anymore. What he could see, however…

Was a towering pillar of white flame rising from the torn depths of the wide crater.

It moved and twisted, as if alive. As though a giant made from pure flame was stretching its shoulders after being trapped underground for a long time. For a moment, Sunny was entranced, thinking that he could make out the shape of a winged being woven from dancing flame, hidden in the depths of the incandescent pillar.

Then, the whirlwind of flame collapsed on itself, and slowly formed into a humanoid figure.

The radiant being looked like a beautiful, pure spirit of immaculate light, her graceful body contrasted against the dark soil of the deep crater. With wide wings spread behind her like a blinding mantle, she slowly glided down. The moment her feet touched the ground, it started to melt.

Slowly, the brilliance of her skin grew dimmer, and was then extinguished. Without the blinding light, Sunny could finally see who had just escaped the ruins.

Of course, he had already guessed who it was.

It was Nephis.

She looked just like the last time he had seen her… but also different.

Not only because the white metal of the Starlight Legion armor was torn and scorched, breached in half a dozen places…

And not only because her presence seemed to illuminate the world, so much stronger and tantalizing than it had been before.

And not even because she had grown even more beautiful after undergoing the rebirth of Transcendence.

No… it was because Nephis had wings.

A pair of white wings extended from her back, looking too majestic and pure to be a part of this mortal world.

Sunny stared, enthralled.

'...Partial transformation?'

There were Transformation Abilities that had several steps to them. From the looks of it, Neph's had at least three — the winged form, the brilliant spirit of light whose radiant body seemed to contain an ocean of furious flame, and the vast mass of unleashed fire that could seemingly assume any form, or no form at all.

At least that was what Sunny surmised after catching a glimpse of Neph's striking arrival.

There had to be more to this Transformation, of course. Sunny doubted that a Divine Aspect would be limited to enhancing one's might and granting one the ability to fly.

He stared for a few more moments, then sighed.

'Well, I can ask her later.'

For now…

Sunny had to do something very unpleasant.

Namely, explain himself.

What was one supposed to say after leaving his partner to face the last challenge of a dreadful Nightmare alone?

Sorry, I had to step out to break fate really quick?

He winced, not looking forward to that conversation at all.

Shaking his head, Sunny stood up and spent a moment evaluating his appearance through the shadows.

He would lie if he said that he wasn't apprehensive about his looks at the moment. Becoming Transcendent had improved his body once again, after all. So… he was certain that he was now reasonably attractive. Even though it was a bit childish, he wanted Nephis to see him in the best possible light the first time they met after escaping the Tomb of Ariel.

Sadly, it did not really matter.

No matter how beautiful the Transcendence had made him, it was impossible to tell what he looked like right now. Because Sunny was completely covered in dirt, dust, and soot. His face was almost entirely hidden beneath a layer of grime.

'Ah… curses…'

He hastily rubbed his face, but only managed to spread the dirt around.

'Goddammit.'

It was too late, however, because that movement attracted Neph's attention.

She turned her head and looked at him, her eyes shining with radiant white light.

Sunny smiled nervously, then hesitated and took a step in her direction.

He had more than one reason to feel nervous.

There were the complicated intricacies of his relationship with Nephis and the consequences of the choice he had made, yes.

But there was also the reason he had made that choice.

His connection to the Nightmare Spell was gone, and his [Fated] Attribute was also gone.

What about Shadow Bond?

As Sunny walked, considering what he would say, Nephis spoke in a calm, even tone:

"Stop."

He took a couple more steps and froze, stunned.

First, because she had broken her promise once again and given him an order.

And second, because he had not felt compelled to follow that order.

'It's… it's…'

It was gone.

The connection between him and Nephis was gone.

Even though Sunny had stopped, it was of his own volition. When she told him to do so, there was nothing forcing him to stop walking. Nothing had overwritten his personal will, nothing had violated his freedom and agency.

Even though he had received a direct command, there was no reaction at all.

Sunny took a shaky breath.

'It... worked. It worked!'

An involuntary smile found its way onto his face.

'I'm free!'

Sunny had been a bit scared to face Nephis after abandoning her at Verge… but he was much more scared that his decision to leave had been for nothing. That would have been a really, really bitter pill to swallow.

But, luckily, it had not been in vain.

Everything had worked just as promised.

[Fated] was gone. The chain of Shadow Bond wrapped around his neck was gone, as well.

His wish had come true.

His smile widened, refusing to go away... which was a bit awkward, considering the nature of the conversation they were about to have.

Sunny opened his mouth, trying to say something…

But Nephis beat him to it.

Looking at him coldly, she frowned slightly and asked:

"Who are you?"

There was no hint of recognition in her voice.

"...Identify yourself."

Chapter-1589: Untethered

"...Identify yourself."

Sunny's smile froze.

His body froze, too.

For a moment, he was utterly confused, doubting that he had heard Nephis correctly. But there was no doubt — her voice was very clear.

'Identify yourself? What is she doing, giving me the cold shoulder?'

He could understand if she was angry at him because of what had happened on the cold shores of Verge. Resentful, even. But still, wasn't it too childish, to pretend as if she did not know him?

Sunny tried to calm down, but at the same time, he knew that he was deceiving himself. Nephis was not the kind of person to lash out by treating him as a stranger… she just genuinely did not recognize him.

'H—how can it be?'

Well... to be fair... he was indeed covered in dust and dirt from head to bottom. It was easy to mistake him for someone else. No, was it? It might have been for someone else, but not for Nephis.

She knew him far too well for that, not to mention that he was wearing a rather unique suit of armor. There was no mistaking the Onyx Mantle.

Sunny hesitated, not knowing what to say.

But he had to say something, because the pressure of the Flaw was building, forcing him to answer.

"It's me… Sunny."

His voice sounded strangely lost.

Neph's frown deepened slightly.

"Your affiliation?"

Petrified and feeling his hair stand on end, Sunny answered stiffly:

"...Evacuation Army, I guess. Army Command, special envoy."

What was going on?

What was happening?

As Sunny was balancing on the edge of mental collapse, desperately trying to keep the emotions from showing on his face, Nephis nodded. It seemed that she accepted his explanation easily.

She looked around, then opened her mouth to say something... possibly to ask what was going on, what date it was, and what state the Southern Quadrant was in. But then her expression changed, and she turned slightly, as if listening to a distant sound.

"Cassie!"

A moment later, Nephis dashed away and plunged her hands into the slope of the crater. Her beautiful white wings spread, and with a barely audible gasp, she pulled a massive alloy plate from under the ground. The plate itself must have weighed many tons, and with the added weight of all the soil and debris piled on top, it should have taken titanic strength to raise it.

But that was exactly the kind of strength Nephis possessed.

Straining her slender body, she gritted her teeth and tossed the massive plate of torn alloy to the side. It landed a dozen meters away from them, making the whole crater shake and raising a cloud of dust into the air.

Then, Nephis jumped down into the ruins below.

Leaving Sunny alone, for a few moments.

He gasped for air, suffocating.

'Fate… the Thieving Bird stole my fate…'

But what did it mean, to have his fate stolen?

In simple terms, it meant that the loathsome miscreant had taken all the countless strings of fate that bound Sunny, and tore them away. Leaving Sunny entirely free of their shackles.

However… those shackles…

Were also what made Sunny the person he was, and what connected him to all other living beings, as well as to the world itself.

He suddenly remembered a thought that had visited him once, in the depths of a Nightmare...

As one went through life, they collected strings and tethers that connected them to others. Everyone's fates were intertwined, and everyone was tied down and bound by those numerous connections, some of them fleeting, some deep and precious. Sunny, too, was tethered to the world that way.

...Or rather, he had been.

By proclaiming that he wanted to break fate… that he wished to be free of its chains…

Had he not proclaimed his desire to set himself free from these tethers, as well?

His mouth was suddenly terribly dry.

Taking a step back, Sunny swayed and almost fell down.

His face was as pale as that of a ghost.

'Be careful… of what you wish for.'

A disbelieving chuckle escaped from his lips.

He should have known that there would be a price to pay… no, he

had known. Of course, he knew. But he stubbornly pressed forward, anyway.

To gain freedom.

Well, now, he had gained it. He had liberated himself. Not just from fate, but from… everything.

When the vile Thieving Bird stole the strings of fate wrapped around him, it also tore his very existence from the tapestry of fate. And so, his existence was erased from the fabric of the world.

His [Fated] Attribute was gone. His connection to the Nightmare Spell was gone.

And much more importantly… he had lost his True Name, as well. Because True Names were innately tied to one's fate.

That was why Nephis could not command him anymore. Everything about his Aspect remained intact, including his Innate Ability, Shadow Bond.

[Find a worthy master and let them know your True Name. Once they recite it out loud, you will be bound to their will, unable to disobey any command. It is improper for a shadow, let alone a divine one, to walk around without a master.]

Shadow Bond had not disappeared. It was just that Sunny did not have a True Name anymore, and therefore, its condition could not be fulfilled.

The bond formed between him and Nephis was broken, and no one else was going to be able to enslave him, ever again.

Because a fateless being could not earn a True Name.

Sunny was truly and utterly free.

But at what cost?

The memories of his existence had been erased from the world.

'Be… be careful… of what you wish... of what you wish for…'

Sunny fell to the ground and looked up, at the grey sky drowning in the flood of rustling swords.

After a while, a terrible smile split his face like a jagged chasm.

Taking a shallow breath, he laughed bitterly and whispered:

"...I'm free."

Chapter-1590: Epilogue

Winter had grasped the streets of NQSC with frigid fingers, making people on the streets shiver from the chill and hurry to get inside. The sky was distant and cold, full of icy clouds.

In one of the more prosperous districts of the city, a splendid-looking young man was sitting on a rusty bench, cradling a cup of luxurious plant-based coffee in his hand. Despite being dressed in light clothes, he didn't seem to be bothered by the cold. In fact, he looked like nothing in this world could bother him.

The people rushing past the park couldn't help but throw furtive glances at the young man. His expensive clothes, lithe figure, alabaster skin, gleaming onyx eyes, and lustrous raven-black hair… but, most of all, the aura of confidence and subdued power emanating from him… made the young man look out of place.

It was as if he belonged in a marble palace instead of this small and bleak park.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Sunny grimaced and shook his head.

"...Still bitter."

Standing up, he tossed the empty cup into a trash bin and crossed the street.

There, a convenience store invited potential customers to come inside with a colorful sign. Sunny hesitated for a moment, then opened the door and did just that.

The bell fixed above the door rang melodiously, announcing his arrival to the clerk.

Ignoring the clerk, who was staring at him with wide eyes, Sunny

looked around the modest store. There were all kinds of food items on the shelves, from cheap synthpaste rations to more extravagant natural snacks. This district was mostly visited by a somewhat affluent crowd, so there was a lot to choose from.

That said, Sunny did not really know what to buy. Despite having been an affluent person himself, once, he had rarely visited stores like this. Most of his time had been spent in the Dream Realm, anyway, and here in the waking world, he would usually either eat at the Academy or cook something up back home.

'Hmm.'

Sunny stared at the shelves for a while, then turned to the window, where a small dining surface was arranged for those who wanted to grab a quick bite right here in the store.

Currently, there was only one person sitting in front of the window. It was a pretty young woman in a neat school uniform, who was absentmindedly eating cup ramen while studying the screen of her communicator with a serious expression. She had pale skin and black hair, just like him.

In fact, one could even say that the two of them looked quite alike.

Sunny cleared his throat and then asked in a neutral tone:

"Hey. What's good here?"

The girl was distracted from her communicator and turned to him, still engrossed in whatever it was she had been reading.

"What?"

Then, she froze, looking at him with wide eyes.

Sunny sighed, already accustomed to such reactions. It had already been a bit bothersome before he Transcended, but now that he was a Saint, mundane humans were often startled by his appearance.

He smiled politely.

"I asked what you would recommend. Is that one good?"

He pointed to her meal.

The girl nodded, acting a little bashful.

"Ah… yes… sir."

'Sir? Well… it's better than "brat", I guess.'

Sunny nodded and went on to purchase himself the same type of cup ramen. Pouring boiling water into the cup, he sat down on the chair next to the young woman — there were only two chairs there, to be fair — and looked into the window.

He was unperturbed, but she seemed to be feeling awkward. After a few moments of silence, the girl asked in a shy tone:

"Can I ask, sir… are you an Awakened?"

Sunny glanced at her, then opened the steaming cup of ramen and picked up his chopsticks.

"Oh? Sure."

He enjoyed the spicy smell, then slurped a generous portion of noodles and chewed them with visible delight.

"Wow, you weren't lying. This one is really good."

The girl stared at him strangely, and then suddenly asked in a hesitant tone:

"I'm sorry, but… do I know you?"

Sunny looked at her and remained silent for a few long moments.

Then, he lightly shook his head.

"No… no, I don't think you do. I mean, why would you? I'm quite a memorable person, actually. I doubt someone would easily forget meeting me. In normal circumstances."

While she looked away in embarrassment, Sunny shrugged.

"Why do you ask?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, it's just that you look familiar, sir. I must have mistook you for someone."

Sunny studied her for a couple more seconds, then turned away.

"Don't worry. I won't hold it against you."

He returned to his food, while the young woman finished hers. They didn't speak again for a while, but then Sunny suddenly asked:

"Are you a local here, in NQSC?"

The girl looked at him in surprise.

"Um… sure? Although I'll be moving soon. My dad, he works for the government. So, with everything that is going on, he is being sent to a new post. We'll be leaving in a few months."

Sunny sighed.

"Ah. I see. Actually, I'll be leaving on a long journey soon, too."

He smiled and put his chopsticks down, then added in a strangely wistful tone:

"...Because I'm far away from home."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head and stood up.

"Well, anyway. Thanks for the recommendation. I'll be sure to repay you, when we meet again."

The young woman looked at him in confusion.

And as she did, a dark serpent flowed from her shadow into the young man's shadow, unnoticed.

At the same time, the shadow of the young man split in two. One remained glued to him, while the other glided across the floor, hesitated for a moment, and hid in the girl's shadow, replacing the dark serpent.

Sunny said a silent goodbye to the happy shadow and smiled.

"Stay safe, Rain. I'll see you around."

With that, he headed for the door.

Startled, Rain rose from her seat and called out:

"Wait… sir? How do you know my name?"

But the strange Awakened was already gone. The bell hanging above the door remained silent, yet the young man was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he had never been there, at all.

All that remained was an empty cup of noodles and lingering feeling of unexplainable familiarity.

And the vivid memory of their odd first meeting.

…Sunny stepped out of the shadows a few hundred meters away and sighed, looking up.

It was time to leave.

White snow was falling slowly from the lonesome grey sky.

[End of part three: Well of Wishes.]

[End of volume seven: The Tomb of Ariel.]